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**A Geometry of Blessing:
Embodiment, Relatedness, and Exorcism amongst Ethiopian
Orthodox Christians in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia**

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PhD Thesis in Social Anthropology

University of Edinburgh

2017

Declaration

I declare that the thesis has been composed by myself and that the work has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification. I confirm that the work submitted is my own. My contribution and those of the other authors to this work have been explicitly indicated below.

Diego Maria Malara
March, 2017
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Abstract

A Geometry of Blessing: Embodiment, Relatedness, and Exorcism amongst Ethiopian Orthodox Christians in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

This thesis is about kinship, neighbourliness, sainthood, fasting and exorcism among Orthodox Christians in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. The uncertainties of providing for oneself and one's family in the city make people deeply reliant on neighbours, kin, and religious networks in order to survive. But these dependencies are also sources of vulnerability—to the demands of close others and the harm they can inflict, but also, increasingly, to demonic possession. A recent surge in public exorcisms testifies to a broad sense of spiritual threat, as well as a perceived need to re-entrench the power and authority of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC) at a time when the effects of religious pluralism and modernization policies pose a particular challenge.

In this thesis, I document the ways in which Orthodox Christians are working to re-situate and reframe their relationships with the EOC in their daily lives. I argue that these efforts are inherently relational, based on the sharing of blessing through substances such as holy water, and on various labours of devotion performed for others or on their behalf. Through fine-grained ethnography, this study finds kinship and other local networks, rather than institutional practices or large-scale rituals, to be the basis of religious action in the city. I show how ordinary people, faced with the contradictions between religious imperatives and the material necessities of life, seek blessing for themselves, their neighbours, and their kin, from powerful human and non-human intercessors and, in turn, how they become intercessors for others.

I pay particular attention to the bodily and affective dimensions of these practices: how people fast together and for one another; how they circulate and consume holy water; and how they subject themselves to violent exorcistic interventions. For Orthodox Christians in Addis Ababa, these bodily practices constitute key methods for acting on the flesh, and thereby engaging with the basic problem of the fallen nature of humanity—which is felt to be particularly pressing in contemporary urban conditions. By taking such perspectives, my thesis aims to contribute to discussions of Christian embodiment, personhood, and subject-formation with a detailed study of the networks and relationships by which people build an intersubjective and interdependent ethics of daily life—an ethics, that is, which contrasts with the discourses of individual self-fashioning that have informed many recent studies of Christianity and piety in other world religions.

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Transliteration and pronunciation of Amharic words

To give non-specialists the best chance of approximating Amharic pronunciation, I adopt Tom Boylston's system as used in his PhD thesis "The shade of the divine: approaching the sacred in an Ethiopian Orthodox community" (2012: 9), which I reproduce below:

Consonants are pronounced similarly to English with the exceptions of the explosives:

q - Explosive 'k'

t' - Explosive 't'

p' - Explosive 'p'

ch' - Explosive version of 'ch' as in 'church'

s' - Explosive 'ts'

- and the consonant **ñ**, pronounced as 'ny' as in the Spanish *mañana*.

The seven vowels are indicated as follows:

1st Order - e – like the e in 'hers' or 'perspicacious' (with no 'r' sound)

2nd Order - u – like the u in 'lunar'

3rd Order - í – as in Fiji

4th Order - a – as in 'man'

5th Order - é – as in 'fiancé'

6th Order - i – a short sound like 'i' in 'laminare' or the 'e' in 'wounded'

7th Order - o – between 'hot' and 'home'

A first-order vowel after the consonant 'w' may tend towards a soft 'o' sound, as in *wot*'. Doubled consonants indicate germination (lengthening or doubling of a consonant). Geminated 'ch' is written 'cch', geminated 'sh' as 'ssh'. An apostrophe separates where two vowels appear together, usually in *Ge'ez* words.

INTRODUCTION

We often sat together, under the flickering neon light of a small office in a shabby building of the Ethiopian Orthodox Patriarchate, passing the chilly evenings in deep discussion. A few unframed posters of Ethiopian saints, hanging precariously from the white, mouldy wall, kept us company. The austere saints seemed to watch our conversations closely—conversations marked by long reflective pauses, recurrent misunderstandings, and equally regular eruptions of laughter. “I laugh at you not because I have no respect, but because explaining our faith to a foreigner is really so complicated. It is like teaching a farmer from southern Ethiopia about snow,” mused Qes¹ Gebru, smiling amicably.

A man in his late thirties, Qes Gebru is an esteemed theologian—one of a new generation of priests who have studied abroad, mastered the English language, and come to “understand the ways of the foreigner,” as he put it. “As in everything, there is always a beginning. But you must understand that this beginning is still with us, we are still living in the same sorrow of this beginning,” the priest told me, laying his hands on the plastic table that separated us, and looking at its surface with half-closed eyes as he gathered his thoughts. He resumed:

You know about Adam and Eve. That is the beginning. They had everything in the Garden of God, no fears or anxieties, and yet they disobeyed God’s commandment and fell from His Grace. Do you think we are so different from them? Let us be clear, we have Christ, who came to redeem us, but we are as disobedient as Adam and Eve. Are we not all sons of Adam?

I asked politely what this had to do with my questions about the distinctive character of religious life in contemporary Addis Ababa. “It has everything to do with it,” retorted the priest:

After the fall, man had to work and sweat, suffer to live; women suffer when they give birth because of God’s curse, and people are each other’s enemies. These things come from our nature of disobedience. You can see that we are fallen and corrupted in every street of Addis Ababa: nobody trusts anybody else; there is only betrayal and malice. In the city, people will cheat you and they will cheat their neighbours, even their families. Is this not the behaviour of Adam? Did he and his wife not try to cheat God? You find this behaviour in the city, because here things are worse: prostitutes and thieves are everywhere... In this place there are so many things that people want and they are ready

¹ “Qes” is the generic title given to priests.

to do anything to get them, even to commit evil deeds against their brothers... Ethiopians became materialists and forgot that only God has power over their life and death. Is this not the road to death through disobedience, the way of the world? Do you think the world can save you? Everything has changed, but man has remained the same creature he was at the beginning.

“So how to avoid that? How can one live a Christian life in this environment?” I tried to ask, before being firmly interrupted. “Wait! Come in, Banchi,” the priest said, ordering in a woman who had been standing quietly by the door. He pulled two jugs from under the table and handed them to her. “One for you, and one for your neighbour, and may God bless you. Now go.” Banchi bowed kindly to me, and whispered a timid “God bless you, father.” The priest explained that this shy young woman, a distant relative, often came to seek his advice: “She is so humble with me, but she has a bad temper with her neighbours and family.” Qes Gebru explained that he had given her holy water, which she had requested for her children. He had been deliberate in suggesting that she share the sacred substance with her immediate neighbour, with whom she had quarrelled a week before. “So, how can you live like a good Christian in Addis Ababa... This is your question, right?” I nodded, anticipating an articulate, theological answer. The priest instead laughed again: “Banchi is your answer.” Amused by my increasing puzzlement, and pointing to my raised eyebrow with his long, thin finger, the priest elaborated in an impatient tone:

This is a long talk. We will need months and you should remove your earwax carefully to understand. God gives you blessing but he wants you to share blessing with others. What is the holy water? It has God’s blessing in it. Blessing is something you often cannot get by yourself; you need somebody to get to God. Our religion is a religion of sharing. If Banchi will not share the blessing of holy water with her neighbour, God is likely not to share His blessing with her. If she will not forgive her neighbour, how can she hope to gain God’s mercy? This is hard... It is written: “You have to love your neighbour and love your enemy.” The problem is that sometimes your neighbour and your enemy are the same person. Yet, if people do not help each other today, how can they survive in such poverty? In the holy book the word “neighbour” can mean your kin, too. You see, my son, who said that our religion is easy? It is not.

“I am still confused, father, you ask more questions than I do!” I dropped my pen and gave up on taking notes, overwhelmed by the priest’s loquaciousness. Qes Gebru continued in an even greater rush:

You know modern medicine, right? Think about it like this: the fall is the sickness, and you can see the symptoms in division and hostility between people, greed and so forth. What is the medicine? The medicine is forgiving, sharing and love. By sharing God’s blessing, you help another person, and you make a strong relationship with God, too, because you do what God wants. Who is the doctor? The Holy Spirit. There is no salvation and no medicine without it, and the Holy Spirit works through people when they love each other. Nevertheless, to do so, people have to defeat the sinful inclinations of their flesh. Because the flesh is envious, greedy, it wants to quarrel...

Let me read you few notes I have here: “We have to become vehicles of blessing, transparent passages of it. Coal is black and opaque. If it is left untouched, it cannot be

transparent. So what to do with it? It needs to be touched by fire and then it can produce radiant light and it becomes bright.” So what is the blackness in us? It is the behaviour of the flesh: greediness, quarrels, envy. Now you understand why in our church we fast so much, because otherwise we are like dark coal, and we cannot share the blessing of God when the flesh enslaves us. For our flesh, fasting is like fire for the coal. When we are able to share blessing we see the truth: God gives you so you can give, forgives you if you are willing to forgive others, and blesses you if you share your blessing with others. So, can you get to God without your neighbour or without your mother? It is through them that most people find God, and this is a difficult and narrow path, Jesus himself said it. I have to go to see the bishop now. Go to your neighbourhood and you will find what I told you. This is how I explain things to my Ethiopian students, but you are a foreigner and you need more time to understand. First, you have to understand how our people live.

I left the office of Qes Gebru dismayed, and more confused than I had been when I entered it. But I took his invitation to go and see for myself as an ethnographic encouragement of sorts. As I would discover, the images conjured by Qes Gebru are apt condensations of the spiritual concerns and travails shared by many Ethiopian Orthodox Christians. Orthodox life in the city entails a deep, embodied sense of fallenness, like a kind of sickness; but ordinary people find ways to overcome their fallen condition by producing, mediating, and sharing blessing with and through one another.

* * *

This thesis is about kinship, neighbourliness, sainthood, fasting and exorcism among Orthodox Christians in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. The uncertainties of providing for oneself and one’s family in the city make people deeply reliant on neighbours, kin, and religious networks in order to survive. But these dependencies are also sources of vulnerability—to the demands of close others and the harm they can inflict, but also, increasingly, to demonic possession. A recent surge in public exorcisms testifies to a broad sense of spiritual threat, as well as a perceived need to re-entrench the power and authority of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC) at a time when the effects of religious pluralism and modernization policies pose a particular challenge.

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contradictions between religious imperatives and the material necessities of life, seek blessing for themselves, their neighbours, and their kin, from powerful human and non-human intercessors and, in turn, how they become intercessors for others.

I pay particular attention to the bodily and affective dimensions of these practices: how people fast together and for one another; how they circulate and consume holy water; and how they subject themselves to violent exorcistic interventions. For Orthodox Christians in Addis Ababa, these bodily practices constitute key methods for acting on the flesh, and thereby engaging with the basic problem of the fallen nature of humanity—which is felt to be particularly pressing in contemporary urban conditions. By taking such perspectives, my thesis aims to contribute to discussions of Christian embodiment, personhood, and subject-formation with a detailed study of the networks and relationships by which people build an intersubjective and interdependent ethics of daily life—an ethics, that is, which contrasts with the discourses of individual self-fashioning that have informed many recent studies of Christianity and piety in other world religions.

Of course, behind my interests in kinship and neighbourliness, or fasting and exorcism, lie the lives of a particular set of people—people who generously shared their hopes and fears with me over a period of 22 months (November 2011 – August 2013). Starting with the state of the fall and its intimate connection with the city, I shall use this Introduction to draw out the significance of some of these fears and hopes, to highlight their anthropological relevance, and to indicate some of the theoretical challenges that they present.

1. Notes on the coordinates of the fall: the uncertain categories of religious experience

At the beginning of my fieldwork, I asked Qes Ambelu, a young priest, if he could explain to me what “the world” is. The priest countered: “You have gone to university and never seen a map?” When I clarified that my question concerned the world as a religious entity, I received a more detailed answer. The world (*alem*), he explained, is the physical space we live in; and yet it is more than an assemblage of matter. To summarize a very complex notion, the world is the condition of fallenness that affects every human being. It is a place of sorrow, hardship, and betrayal, one in which human fights against human, and where everybody is at constant risk of being swallowed up

by ubiquitous temptation. But if the world is the material theatre in which the drama of fallen existence unfolds, Qes Ambelu pointed out that “Not everything we see and touch is of this world.” Churches, for instance, are spiritual spaces; the Eucharistic bread is spiritual matter, and so is holy water. Seyoum, a university student in his late twenties, later suggested that in order to grasp the post-lapsarian condition, I should think in terms of adjectives rather than nouns. The term *alemawi* or “worldly” might refer to a set of sinful activities, thoughts and desires that replicate the tragedy of the fall, by increasing the already vast distance between humanity and the divine. Every act geared towards production or prompted by the necessities of daily life, while not having univocal negative connotations, is equally worldly. By contrast, the term *menfesawi* or “spiritual” encompasses a broad domain of religious action—including prayer, fasting, almsgiving, and so forth—that, as Qes Ambelu explained, “speaks to us of God, makes God closer to us, and unites us with Him.” Or, as the priest evocatively suggested, “*Menfesawi* is all that which, as Saint Athanasius says, makes us sons in the Son and lets the spirit scream in us: Father!”

Nevertheless, boundaries between the spheres of the worldly and the spiritual are not impermeable. While certain sinful acts, like theft or adultery, are considered to be unambiguously worldly, other acts are more complicated. Working to feed one’s family, for example, can be considered an ethically positive act, and it embodies Orthodox ideals of care and self-sacrifice. But it might also take one away from the church, leaving one with little time or energy to attend services. As such, work is often experienced as being deeply worldly, and as an extension of the curse of Adam. Rather than a rigid taxonomy, we are dealing with a fluid field of engagement and evaluation that is not devoid of its own contradictions and classificatory uncertainties. As I will illustrate throughout, these are uncertainties and contradictions that the Christian subject is called to embrace and work through not just intellectually, but through a panoply of eminently bodily practices of re-orientation set out by the EOC. As the world distracts, absorbs, and turns Orthodox subjects away from God, religious practices orient them toward divinity and its laws; or, to resort to Orthodox corporeal iconography, such practices make us “strain the neck to God” (*wede Egzabiher mangetet*).

In many ways, the opposition between the “worldly” and the “spiritual” maps closely on that between the “flesh” (*sigā*) and the “soul” (*nefs*). According to Qes Ambelu,

the flesh is “made of the same matter as the world.” If left unchecked, it tends naturally towards sinful propensities, ubiquitous in the fallen space humans inhabit. However, in everyday discourse, the term *sigawi* or “fleshly” seemed to hold more negative connotations than “worldly”, denoting a more narrow set of activities that are decisively immoral. Yet again, the larger picture is slightly more complex than the idiom of dichotomy would suggest. And indeed, the flesh can be transformed in its orientations and propensities, becoming itself an instrument of redemption. This reversal, however, often requires careful and painstaking disciplinary work on behalf of Orthodox believers. Crucially, as I will argue, this work is never just a work of the self on the self, nor a solitary ascetic endeavour; rather, it is a concerted plural form of religious labour necessitating others, involving and affecting them.

It is axiomatic that the redemptive power of the Holy Spirit (*Menfes Kidus*), through which God has acted in the world since the departure of Christ, manifests itself more intensively through spiritual relationships and spiritually-oriented collectives. Such manifestations are chiefly known and intimately felt through blessing (*bereket*)². Blessing, as a concept and an entity, is hard to pin down, since its immanent instantiations encompass everything from luck to plentifulness, from peace of mind to good health. Rather than attempting to provide any comprehensive definition, in the following chapters I shall try to grasp the significance of blessing’s multiplicity through the ethnographic description of concrete social interactions and contexts whereby blessing is produced and experienced. Blessing is often the product of a divinely-initiated act, and yet Orthodox believers can elicit its dispensation in the fallen world through appropriate human action. Blessing can be exponentially multiplied, circulated within mundane frameworks, shared with others or solicited on their behalf (cf. Pitt-Rivers 2011). The quest for blessing, too, is better conceived as a collective one.

The story of the fall is not just a story one reads, but a story one lives. My interest lies less in understanding the narrative of the fall through the lives of the people I met, than in grasping their daily existence and their religious efforts to live with the acute

² “Blessing” is closely related to “grace”, or *tsegga*, and the two terms are commonly used as synonyms. Nevertheless, from a theological point of view, grace is a free, divine gift that allows—among other things— clergy to perform the sacraments. Some priests suggested that blessing might be better conceived as an outcome of partaking in the sacraments, but not as what authorizes their efficacy. Such distinctions, however, remain blurred at best for the majority of the laity.

sense of fallenness that saturates life in the Ethiopian capital. Seyoum described the capital as the epitome of the fallen condition. He vividly defined his native city as “a worldly place, worldlier than others,” or as “sin city”, a reference to the popular Hollywood movie. Like other Orthodox urban dwellers, Seyoum hastened to indicate that living a productive spiritual life in this corrupted urban space is fraught with difficulties, but ultimately possible—and, indeed, desperately necessary. The challenges posed by this difficulty and necessity, as well as the specific spiritual possibilities that life in the capital may afford, are crucial concerns for my informants and key themes of this thesis. While Seyoum pointed to the pervading moral pollution of a city that hosts all sorts of sinful activities, he also emphasised that Addis Ababa has the highest concentration of churches in the country, and that divine blessing is widely available in and through them for those who seek it. In the following section, I shall provide a more detailed elucidation of the specific configurations that the fall assumes in the lived urban environment, as well as of the religious apprehensions that inform the lives of those who attempt to navigate such an environment in a spiritually productive way.

2. The flesh, the world, the city

Like Seyoum and the priest in the vignette above, most of my informants considered the city to be a place where temptations abound. Its very sense-scape is one of enveloping sinfulness, and Orthodox Christians are intensely aware of the spiritual dangers posed by their surroundings. “To see is to desire, and to desire is to sin” (*mayet memagnet new, memagnet hat'yat new*), goes an Orthodox adage often repeated by priests. Young men worry about the attractions exerted over their desirous flesh by the modern and revealing dressing style of urban women, as well as about the sight of countless prostitutes on the streets of the capital and in almost every bar after dark. Many Orthodox women see in prostitution a patent sign of the moral decay of Ethiopian society, and detect in the intense desires of today’s men a spiritual weakness typical of modern Ethiopia. But apprehensions surrounding desire are hardly confined to the sphere of sexuality. Most people I came to know are both fascinated and troubled by the inescapable visibility of material indices of a new type of wealth, often inaccessible to them—such as the mushrooming shopping malls and tower blocks that are rapidly changing the architectural physiognomy of Piassa, the “old town” of the Addis Ababa where I conducted most of my research. Equally unsettling is the

proliferation of expensive imported goods, embodying the aesthetic allure of the “foreign” and the “modern”, which are showcased at the front of countless shops on Piassa’s main roads. In religious terms, as Seyoum surmised, the problem is that:

You walk around and you see something that you desire, and you might desire it too much. Many times, you cannot have this thing because you are poor, or because of other reasons connected to the fact that you don’t have enough money. Then you might become angry and frustrated or even aggressive. Some people then think of illicit means to get what they want. This is how the world tests you. And in the city... Well, we see all sorts of things.

The bursting and never-ending traffic of cars, goods, money, and people adds a layer of confusion and distraction to the disorientation that ensues from exposure to so many desires potentially at odds with the sober, ascetic focus that the Orthodox faith demands. In the city, everything and everybody keeps moving, and moving fast. Even the placid elders who have decided to distance themselves from the decoys of worldliness in pious preparation for their passage to the afterlife see their efforts disturbed by the constant turmoil of the capital.

Seyoum brought to my attention the stark contrast between the wide commercial main streets and the tangled alleyways of the poorer areas of Piassa, where most of my informants lived (cf. Angelil & Hebel 2010; Di Nunzio 2012). Off the main roads, narrow unpaved paths descend downhill or climb tortuously uphill. They are lined by houses built with cane and mud mixed with straw, precariously roofed with a few sheets of corrugated aluminium, and sometimes dignified by a thin enamel of cracked plaster. A few run-down houses made of bricks stand here and there as a fading testimony to the Italian occupation and Imperial times (see Chapter One). Private houses constructed in concrete are much less common. Even rarer, and much yearned after, are the new “condominiums”, apartment buildings four storeys high, or taller, which cast long shadows over the habitations of those who live amassed in patches a few square meters wide below them, often without running water. “When you live in poor conditions but you see this wealth just a few meters away from of your door step, how can you live a peaceful life of spiritual purity? Who would not grow envious of other’s people houses and lives? A saint, I guess,” asked Seyoum, returning to his previous concerns about the fraught intersections of desire, temptation and environment.

As the sun sets, Piassa begins to light up tenuously with the coloured neon of myriad bars, where loud music is played and people drink local beer and cheap liquor,

loosening the constraints of moral etiquette. The violence that drunkenness unleashes has been a persistent feature of the nocturnal landscape of areas like Piassa for years, but now it saturates the late hours of the old city with even greater aggression. The quarrels one constantly witnesses—or gets into—are yet another painful remainder of the fallen condition, and its sinful hostility engraved in every descendant of Adam. “Quarrels come from the devil” (*til ke Seytan new yimetaw*), the Ethiopian dictum goes. In recent years, a few modern clubs have appeared in Piassa. Here the local youth engage in dancing and flirting, wearing their best clothes and scented with abundant perfume. Apart from disturbing the sleep of those who reside nearby, such spaces add to the sinfulness of the city, investing passers-by with scents, sounds, and visions charged with the imagery of transgression, sexuality, and drunkenness (see Chapter Three). Sin, as we will see, is not merely an internalized, concupiscent disorder of the soul (cf. Asad 1993); rather, it is produced and reproduced by a sensory reciprocity between self and space (cf. Seremetakis 1991), inhering more densely to some places than others (see Chapter Four).

In the city the “stuff of the body, the flesh itself, weighs heavily” (Shaw 1998:3; cf. Christian 1972:163). The burden of the flesh is perceived not just through the relationship between the body and its material surroundings. For many, it is known chiefly through the agonies and worries connected to labour and provision. “Having worked to eat” (*sarto mablat*) is the expression that many of my informants used to convey the meaning of labour (see Chapter Two). Much as Donald Levine notes for rural Amhara³, “having enough to feed oneself, one’s family, and one’s guest in the furthest horizon” (1965:81) is a constant and pressing preoccupation—one that comes to carry all the weight of the curse of the “sweat of the brow.” These preoccupations weigh even more heavily in a context where unemployment, paltry wages, and the rising cost of living engender new and more piercing forms of uncertainty. While labour is associated with the paramount values of dignity and self-reliance (cf. Levine 1965:81-81), many city dwellers face constant distress over the fact that what one produces—often by working multiple jobs—is not enough to meet the minimal demands of family life.

³ Ethnic group hegemonic during imperial times.

In itself a “good thing” (*melkam neger*), labour is fraught with its own spiritual ambiguities. As I have suggested, *alemawi sira* or “worldly work” can be attributed spiritual valence in contexts where it expresses adherence to normative obligations towards one’s family and intimate others, becoming an exemplification of other-oriented Orthodox moral injunctions. Yet the taxing demands of labour, and the worries that accompany them, might also contribute to widening the gap between fallible humanity and perfect divinity. Urban workers often feel deprived of time to attend lengthy church services or to observe days of rest in honour of patron saints. More problematically, their excessive absorption in the fast-paced cycles of urban labour might cause people to forget God, enmeshed as they are in the frantic repetition of acts dictated by urgency and necessity. Indeed, the anxieties surrounding labour risk obscuring its real and deeper spiritual valences and purposes. And, critically, fears connected to provision for others impose daunting tests (*fetanoch*): overwhelmed by necessity, informants comment, a poor parent might entertain the idea of stealing in order to provide for his or her hungry child (see Chapter Two for a similar example).

Nevertheless, while for one person felt lack and suffering can be reasons for sin, rebellion, and doubt, for another, they become a reason for supplication and dialogue with God. “You often reunite with God through desperate requests,” I was told by Butish, a devout young woman. God is nearest to the sufferer, and yet the sufferer is often led—erroneously and sinfully—to wonder why God is so removed from his or her needy self, so angry or indifferent to human predicaments. This paradoxical experience of divine proximity is aptly captured by Julia Kristeva:

The implicitness of love and, consequently, of reconciliation and forgiveness, completely transforms the scope of Christian initiation, by giving it an aura of glory and unwavering hope for those who believe. Christian faith appears, then, as an antidote to the hiatus and depression [of worldly living], but one which includes hiatus and depression and starts from them. (Kristeva 1989:264)

In Addis Ababa, hiatus and depression also refract in a multiplicity of concrete bodily forms—dis-eases of urban life that my informants see as palpable signs of the doleful abyss between creature and Creator opened by the fall (cf. Cannell 2006; Sahlins 1996). To give but one example, everybody agrees that the new national disease is *cinqet*, or “stress”. Mostly an urban phenomenon, *cinqet* is described as “being unable to control one’s worries” or “losing clarity of judgment.” As Seyoum put it, “Your head becomes as crowded as the city itself.” *Cinqet* mirrors the business of the urban environment, the pressing necessity of keeping up with frenetic crowds of competing

individuals. My informants lament that people today fall more easily under the domination of their worries, a state that narrows the orientation of the Christian self towards the fulfilment of one's most urgent and unequivocally worldly needs. Overtaken by anxieties about providing for oneself and one's family, many people fear that they might forget their obligations toward friends and neighbours. For others, *cinqet* also indexes a problematic lack of faith in divine providence—a faith expressed by the much cited Biblical verse, “Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to your life?” (Luke 12:25). *Cinqet* should not be surrendered to, but dealt with by passionate prayer and fasting; indeed, it is a widespread opinion that “Unburden me from my stress” (*cinqet awrdillign*) was becoming one of the most heard invocations in the many churches dotting the territory of Addis Ababa.

Understood as a problem of the mind (*aymero*), *cinqet* also has immanent manifestations in restless, agitated bodies. It afflicts people through another disproportionately widespread disease of modernity: *ceggwara* (literally, guts), or “gastritis”. *Cinqet* “makes you thinner” (*maksat*), “makes you darker” (*metikor*), or “makes one go grey” (*meshebet*). “It saws a person in half” (*cinqet gezegezew*) and “makes one waste away” (*amenemenew*). Some of these embodied manifestations, as we shall see in the last two chapters of this thesis, are reminiscent of the corporeal paroxysms of another recurrent affliction: demonic possession. And indeed, *cinqet* is often one of the major symptoms of possession, or its horrific prelude. “The body,” John and Jean Comaroff remind us, “cannot escape being a vehicle of history, a metaphor or metonym of being in time” (1972:79; cf. Lambek 2003). Seyoum echoed this anthropological claim by commenting, with a bitter smile, that “*Cinqet* is a good symbol of modern Ethiopia and the modern Ethiopian.” In this respect, he noted, *cinqet* is also linked to apprehensions about novel forms of consumption and urban enjoyments.

In fact, while fleshly desires are often connected to lack, they do not necessarily originate in it. Intense desire for the urban comforts and innovations that some people can now afford, if at high cost, are thought to foster what Messay Kebede (1999) considers the primal sin of Ethiopians: the illusion of self-sufficiency, and the misrecognition of the total dependency of creature on Creator. Today, this illusion is often fuelled by the accumulation of worldly possessions. Many urban dwellers are increasingly involved in—indeed, according to many of my informants, obsessed by—

the restless attempt to improve their living conditions through highly valued material and immaterial goods: modern education, technology, cars, and the acquisition of all sorts of modern things that act as new signs of social status and mobility. Yet, as Olivier Clement writes in his Orthodox ruminations on European modernity: “we seek security through the mastery of the world—and it becomes our tomb” (2000:11). This concern is consistent with Ethiopian Orthodox notions of divinely-controlled fate (*idil*), which postulates explicitly that none of the comforts and advancements of modern life can be ultimately beneficial to humanity, as human destiny can be reversed at any moment if one forgets who the true master is (Messay 1999). Orthodox ritual discipline, in its various forms, serves precisely the purpose of taming unruly desires, reframing and recalibrating the intensity of relationships between the self and the transient stuff of the world, while forcefully restating divine mastery as the only source of ultimate security.

My informants’ narratives also revealed a recognition that the unprecedented availability of new goods entraps the modern believer in a vicious spiral in which s/he is fated, as Augustine put it, “to pursue one thing after another till his needs are so multiplied that he cannot find the one thing needful, a single and unchangeable nature” (Augustine, cited in Deane 1963:45). The idea that the fulfilling a desire, rather than placating it, only begets a new one of greater intensity and sinfulness is key to Ethiopian Orthodox discourses of consumption and progress. It is an idea that finds a strange echo in the deep-seated anguish that Marshall Sahlins detects among post-enlightenment social scientists, but whose root he traces back to the myth of the fall:

Just as developed capitalism and the industrial revolution were coming upon them, European philosophers consummated centuries of guilt by the discovery that the demands of the flesh increased with “progress” of the society. Necessarily so, since progress was Reason in the service of needs. (Sahlins 1996:400)

For these philosophers, this discovery led to the painful awareness of a “contradiction [...] between a ‘progress’ that supposedly represented the triumph of human spirit over the body, and an escape from our animal nature, and, on the other, the dependence of this happy result on an increasing awareness of bodily affliction—more need” (ibid.:400). For many Ethiopian men and women, who grapple with a similar set of quandaries engendered by the exponential growth of worldly needs and wants, such is the necessary course of modernity, too.

At the same time, my informants are left to deal with the painful delusions about the promises of development on which the current government, as well as its predecessors, failed to deliver (see Di Nunzio 2012; Mains 2007). Projects of modernization have been central to the discourses and policies of the Ethiopian state since the late Imperial time and yet, as Seyoum lamented cynically:

Development... Everybody speaks of it nowadays, even children repeat this word like parrots. But it's just chit-chat (*were were bich'a new*). I haven't seen, touched or eaten this development. A few got fatter, the rest of us see improvements from afar and are left to wonder about development with a stomach empty of food and full of anger and envy.

Hope for an Ethiopian “renaissance”—a word dear to the current government’s economic rhetoric (see Alazar 2013)—has led to a diffuse disillusionment in the face of even steeper inequalities (see Mains 2012). For Qes Ambelu, these inequalities, too, are intimately associated with the fall:

Is this not the nature of the son of Adam? Man disobeyed God in the garden [Eden] and he still keeps disobeying: one gets rich and he ignores the poor. In God’s garden there were neither poor nor rich. Adam failed the test, and today modern man still keeps failing, and keeps falling farther and farther.

Modernity, everybody agrees, is “problematic” (*ascheggari*). Many elders would repeat to me admonishingly: “to be civilized [modern] is to be demonized” (*Meselten meseyten new*). The meanings of *zemenawinet* (literally, “of the time”), the local term for modernity, are hard to define in a systematic and unambiguous fashion (see Donham 1986, 1999; Paulos 2008; cf. Geschiere 1997). The next chapter discusses at greater length various processes of modernization, identifying a profound conflation between notions of “modernity” and “foreignness”. But perhaps the search for a clear definition of modernity risks emptying social phenomena of precisely what we intend to grasp: their fluidity, plasticity and irreducible multiplicity. In my last chapter, which deals with new forms of public exorcism, I illustrate how the puzzling forces of modernity are played out through a drama that binds together themes as diverse as nationhood, secularization, desire, consumption, and generational change.

Social life in the crowded neighbourhoods where the majority of my informants lived was fraught with its own spiritual dangers. The uncertainty of meeting one’s daily needs render people increasingly reliant on neighbours, kin, and extended religious networks. But these overlapping nets of dependencies are also a source of vulnerability—to the pressing demands of close others, to their capacity for harm (afforded by spatial and affective proximity), and, increasingly, to spirit possession,

whose causes are often traced to social and familial histories of conflict (see Chapter Five). My informants were adamant that without the network of support provided by neighbours, it would be impossible to survive. Nevertheless, envy and malice are pervasive; it is common knowledge that “the enemy never comes for afar” (*tilat ke ruk aymetam*). This risk could be read as one articulation of a wider paradox of intimacy, illustrated by Peter Geschiere: “a profound ambivalence about intimacy—as desirable yet at the same time frightening—haunts humans forms of sociality all over the world” (2013:xxxii). In the following chapters, I will explore the local declensions of this ambivalence, while extending my investigation to the nexus between intimate vulnerabilities and forms of dependency, illustrating how these problematics operate on multiple scales: the family, the neighbourhood, the city and the nation. But if we aim to grasp how such ambivalence and vulnerability run across the various axes of Ethiopian sociality, I suggest, we might first need to partially revise received sociological understandings of individual and communal values and orientations within Orthodox social formations.

In his seminal study of rural Amhara communities, Donald Levine detects at the very heart of “Amhara culture” an essentially individualistic, almost autarkic, orientation. He confidently asserts that “there is little spontaneous co-operation in Amhara life” and “the Amhara prefers to work by himself, and, when he needs assistance, to order a subordinate to help him rather than to rely on friendly assistance from his neighbour” (1965:247). In a context where “The distribution as well as the production of goods is carried out on an essentially individualistic basis” (*ibid.*), the idealized vision of social relatedness is summarized by descriptions of the ideal-typical Amhara peasant, who “likes to live on his own land, at a good distance from neighbours,” limiting interactions with them to the formal demands of etiquette (*ibid.*:75; see also Hoben 1970, 1973). He also makes a more radical claim:

Positive moral obligations to persons outside the circle of close ones [mostly consanguineal kin] are thus kept to a minimum. Following the conventions of respect towards superiors and peers is all that is enjoined. The good life of the Amhara peasant is lived within a minimal, Hobbesian order. The ideal neighbour is defined as the one that does not touch others. (Levine 1965:82)

In the destitute areas of Addis Ababa where I spent most of my time, by contrast, my informants lived by the popular wisdom that “a close neighbour is better than distant kin” (*ke ruk zemed kerb gorebet yshalal*). Life in poor neighbourhoods is one of incessant flow across the permeable borders of houses—a traffic of food, children,

knowledge, and money, that can help make vulnerable lives sustainable by demanding mutual cooperation (see Chapter One). As Butish put it, drawing on a widespread image, “Neighbours are your life insurance.” The multiple dependencies binding neighbours who live in precarious conditions to one another are doomed to generate conflicts that make the Christian injunction of “loving thy neighbour” difficult to sustain at best—“You have to love your neighbour and your enemy. The problem is that sometimes your neighbour and your enemy are the same person,” as Qes Gebru noted in the opening vignette. Yet, as I will illustrate in the following sections, it is precisely because of this difficulty that, in the Orthodox framework, love and care for close others can so effectively elicit divine favour and exact worldly and otherworldly dividends.

The Hobbesian picture traced by Levine draws its contours from his restricted methodological focus on courts, land disputes, and the peculiarly warrior-like ethos of rural Amhara men, portrayed as steadfast in their defence of family, land, and country at all costs and at any moment. In this account, society appears to be loosely held together by hierarchical, dyadic ties of interest, patronage, and domination (Hoben 1973; Levine 1965; Molvaer 1995). By contrast, this dissertation illustrates that if we reframe our ethnographic focus on domestic spaces, feminine activities of devotion and provision, and the wider networks of mutual assistance that religious practices contribute to engendering and sustaining, we might come up with a different and more complex picture of everyday sociality (cf. Strathern 1992). This is a picture that, without denying the lasting significance of social asymmetries and individualistic drives, acknowledges the salience of intertwined relations of kinship and neighbourliness based on solidarity, care and protection—relations that remain, nevertheless, ambivalent and dangerous. In the next section, I will show that in order to navigate challenging networks of relatedness in a religiously productive way, Orthodox Christians deem it necessary to act upon the most spiritually problematic component of their person: the flesh.

3. The fallen and the redeemed: the work of the flesh, the work on the flesh, and the mechanics of intercession

The flesh leans towards toward sinful desires. It seeks its “happiness” (*desta*) in worldly activities and objects that, as Qes Ambelu put it, “modern man often elevates

to the rank of idols.” As I show in my third chapter, the relationship between food and the proclivities of the flesh is critical: excessive eating fosters aggression, inflates sexual desires, and leads to selfishness and the illusion of human self-sufficiency from God. It is no accident that the Amharic term *tigab* connotes both satiation and arrogance. This is a peculiar type of arrogance: one that causes the believer to forget God, making individual needs and wants the ultimate concerns of human existence. Such a condition is closely echoed by Clement’s theological ruminations on the fall:

Man is the idolater of himself. The impulse to worship which is basic to human nature, human beings have diverted towards themselves, thus cutting themselves off from the Source of life upon which nevertheless they still depend and turning back towards the nothingness out of which they were created. (2000:10)

In a similar “turning back,” the *tigabegna*—the person affected by *tigab*—not only forgets about God, but also about ethical obligations towards others, sealing himself or herself off from their needs and pain. To paraphrase Clement, under these conditions, the other-oriented impulse towards solidarity and care inspired by religious worship (*mesgana*) becomes instead “a blind force” directed towards self-satisfaction; rather than “working through us to find its fulfilment in God, it plays with our closed and misshapen selves, rattling these ‘atoms’ together” (2000:11). My informants lamented that being caught in such a state of spiritual disorientation results not simply in the severance of relationships with close others, but often charges intimate relationships with inimical and egotistic affects—leading to a tendency to take others as mere instruments towards the fulfilment of one’s desires. This vision is consistent with a decidedly negative indigenous anthropology, which various scholars of Ethiopia have not failed to identify:

[T]he Amhara [...] suffers no illusion about homo sapiens at his best—unless they are dark illusions. The generic word for “man” in Amaharic, *saw*, is the subject of a number of negative associations and idiomatic use. [...] In general, one may say that the Amhara’s view of human nature is dominated by his perception of man’s inherent aggressiveness and untrustworthiness. The Amhara believes that unformed human nature is poor raw material and that without strict punishment throughout childhood a person will grow up to be rude and offensive towards others. As an adult, moreover, he must constantly be kept in check. (Levine 1965:80; cf. Hoben 1973).

“This is a good description of man after the fall,” Qes Ambelu commented, when I clumsily translated this passage to him. Unformed human nature, the priest noted, must be kept in check through religious discipline and renunciations geared toward the weakening of the flesh. Here lies another central tension that will frame part my ethnographic discussion in the chapters that follow. On the one hand, the people I

came to know in Addis Ababa shared an ontological vision of humanity similar to that outlined by Levine. On the other, they frequently made the strong moral assertion that the very purpose of Orthodoxy and its disciplinary apparatus is to counteract the above-mentioned negative consequences of the fall, as they are engraved in the flesh of every individual. Thus, in a sense, this dissertation is about ordinary believers' constant efforts to overcome their fallen nature through religious action.

The picture I have traced so far might risk reproducing the “ascetic stereotype” of Christianity as the “impossible religion” that Fenella Cannell (2006) sees at work in many anthropological studies. Such stereotype originates in the face-value acceptance of Christianity's otherworldly orientation, in which access to the transcendent plane of divinity comes “only at the cost of a privileging of the ‘life after death’ over the life of this world, and the future life of the spirit over the present life of the flesh” (Cannell 1999:197). Most crucially, Cannell illustrates that in a religious world marked by the Hegelian “pathos of God's absence”:

Because God has withdrawn from the world, spirit and matter have become opposite and can never again be fully reconciled. Moreover, spirit may be perceived as “beyond” and “better than” flesh, since spirit is that of which God is made. This becomes the reason for fasting and other forms of self-mortification, in which the person limits the claims of the flesh in order to increase the space in himself that is given to the spirit, and thus come a little closer to the divine ideal. And the irreconcilable divergence between spirit and flesh, or spirit and matter becomes in turn [...] the basis for many other kinds of dualistic opposition in which one element is thought of as “beyond” the other. (Cannell 2006:18)

Despite Orthodoxy's discursive emphasis on the elevation of the spirit above the flesh, as well as on the incommensurability of divine perfection with the inadequacies of embodied humanity (see Boylston 2012), Orthodox doctrines and practices display—somewhat paradoxically—another “aspect in which the flesh is an essential part of redemption” (Cannell 2006:7; see also Mayblin 2010:5). Following Maya Mayblin (2010) and the lead of my informants, I set out to explore how such seemingly paradoxical views of flesh and spirit constitute less a speculative problem to be contemplated theologically or resolved intellectually, than an immanent challenge to be worked through in everyday life and its embodied forms of engagement. In order to begin to illustrate how the “impossible religion” is made possible pragmatically, we need to move away from a vision of Christian disciplinary regimes as the expression of a radical and unilateral devaluation of the flesh. Teresa Shaw underscores that the taming of carnal passions through bodily mortification is only one side of the ascetic coin, of which the positive establishment of “the foundation of virtues” through

embodied practice constitutes an essential counterpart (1998:6). Similarly, in her classic study of mediaeval female ascetics, Caroline Bynum debunks neatly dualistic understandings of the body-soul relation by arguing that “efforts to discipline and manipulate the body should be interpreted more as elaborate changes rung upon the possibilities provided by fleshliness than a flight from physicality” (1988:6). Elsewhere, she clarifies that even the strictest and most torturous forms of discipline were “not so much the rejection of physicality as the elevation of it—a horrible yet delicious elevation into means to access the divine” (Bynum 1989:162; cf. Brown 1988:xlii). In the following section, I illustrate in greater depth how Ethiopian Orthodox cosmology and practices entail similar non-dualistic and dialectic conceptions of the intimate connection between flesh and soul.

Bodies, spiritual relations, and redemption

As Tom Boylston (forthcoming) notes, many Orthodox disciplinary practices are more or less distant echoes of a central model, represented by the religious abstentions regulating access to the Eucharist. Communicants need to abstain from food and sex for eighteen hours prior to the consumption of the sacrament (see Chapter Four). Approaching the Eucharist, in other words, necessitates an interruption of the relational circuits of shared substance—within which carnal negative affects typically arise—in order to commune with the ultimate purity of the divine (cf. Boylston 2012, 2013; Hannig 2013, 2014). This process is one of marking boundaries between bodies, and effecting a momentary bodily closure towards others—aims which also inform fasting, the consumption of holy water and other sacred substances, and even access to churches or other sacred spaces.

While this argument reveals a key logic of discipline, throughout this thesis I shall argue that limiting the scope of ethnographic description to bodily closures and the interruption of relations of commensality may also divert from the implicit telos of disciplinary practice. Indeed, despite the strict regulation of the flux of substances by which bodies are connected, religious discipline by and large does not engender a suspension of relationality per se. Rather, discipline operates through subtle shifts and modifications in mundane forms of relating, foregrounding their inherent spiritual potential, and inaugurating a new ethical openness to others. Discipline attempts to transform mundane relationships charged with the sinful inclinations of the flesh into

forms of relatedness sustained and motivated by other-oriented concerns, as well as dispositions of leniency, such as the willingness to forgive.

The fact that this shift in relationality originates in decisive bodily changes, rather than in a straightforward negation of physicality, is perhaps better exemplified by the various fasts that punctuate the Orthodox calendar. Acting on the flesh by giving up food engenders and hones potent intersubjective, empathetic affects. Through fasting, the egotistic carnal passions of *tigab* are substituted by another set of ethical sensibilities, which make the pain of others felt in and through one's very body, viscerally inspiring acts of care towards them. Unlike some western philosophical traditions, in Orthodoxy the conditions for ethical action and commitment are not constituted by an "unaltered" or pure and unitary state of mind, characterized by reason as the ground of truth, objectivity, decisiveness, consistency, and constancy" (Lambek 2010a:722; cf. Lambek 2013). Rather, in Ethiopian Orthodoxy, the very ground of ethical relationships is itself corporeal, based on a real sense of material and affective connectedness between bodies. To put it differently, far from dealing with disembodied ethical principles, we are confronted with the disciplinary cultivation of other-oriented, carnal, "moral reflexes" (Hirschkind 2001).

This intersection between ethics and corporeality is again reminiscent of the Catholic ascetics studied by Bynum, for whom religious renunciations would enhance those sensibilities necessary to be "'switched on' by the 'other,'" heightening renouncers in "an affectivity or sensuality that goes beyond both the senses and the words to describe them" (1987:169). Through my discussion of fasting in Chapter Three, I attempt to address these powerful affective and sensual dimensions. I will suggest that, for the majority of my informants, it is these potent embodied experiences—rather than scriptural knowledge or refined intellectual understandings of the tenets of Orthodox faith—that constitute the basis of religious identity and action (see also Chapter Four).

Finally, Bynum notes that in medieval Christianity, fasting "was to embrace hunger, to join in with the vulnerability and famine that threatened all living things, in order to induce from the creator and provider of blessing the gift of fertility [...] and salvation" (1989:33). A very similar conception runs deeply in the Ethiopian Orthodox tradition. Fasting, as well as other forms of renunciation, are not considered complete unless they produce generalized blessing that will benefit not just the renouncer, but

also his or her intimate others and, on the furthest horizon, the entire country. Collective and synchronized fasting, for instance, solicits divine mercy for the “sins of the world,” enhancing social peace, and eliciting protection from famine and drought. As I illustrate below, a central argument of this thesis is that one of the most distinctive feature of Orthodox religious labour lies in its capacity to produce and reproduce blessing by drawing upon a wide array of relationships and to include others into shared circles of blessing.

Circles of blessing and the chains of intercession

Bynum observes how, across a significant span of European history, “Secular society expected women to be intimately involved in caring for the bodies of others (especially the young, the sick and the dying)” (1987:172). “To some extent,” she adds, “women simply took these roles over into their most profound religious experiences” (ibid.). Along similar lines, classic ethnographies of Catholicism and Orthodoxy have unveiled the salience of female devotional labour of a more mundane kind—one interlaced with domestic chores of provision, feeding and care—as an essential element in the transmission and reproduction of religious traditions (Christian 1972; Eade & Sallnow 1991; Mayblin 2010; Pina-Cabral 1986; Seremetakis 1990, 1991). This gendered typology of religious labour has passed relatively unnoticed in studies of Ethiopian Orthodox society. In this thesis, I aim to address this gap by focusing on how Ethiopian women play a central role in the Orthodox universe by “caring for the bodies of others”, as well as by chastening their own flesh in order to elicit blessing for others. The other-oriented ethics underpinning these self-sacrificial efforts is most evident in motherly devotional labour. Mothers are in charge of their children’s spiritual education, growth and protection, but also largely responsible for the spiritual well-being of the entire household, for which they pray and make vows to saints, and in which they regulate times of consumption and fasting. The house, I will argue, is a sacred space in its own right—one in which mothers carry out the hard work of quotidian intercession with the divine (cf. Herzfeld 2015).

By extending my focus from domestic spaces to their immediate surroundings, I attempt to unveil the salience of circles of shared blessing in which kin and neighbours are included, and to which both contribute. For the majority of my informants, it is such circles of blessing—more than official churchly rituals—that constitute the

primary basis of religious experience in the city. In this respect, my analysis follows Simon Coleman's invitation to refocus analytical attention "away from the most obvious centres of religious action," moving from "core, 'hard' ritual practices and towards apparent ritual and aesthetic peripheries" (2014:290). By doing so, I aim to contribute to the burgeoning recent anthropology of Orthodoxy, upon which I draw implicitly. While many recent works have focused productively on aspects of Orthodox religiosity such as the veneration of icons (Hanganu 2010; Luehrmann 2010), the enduring relevance of miracles (Heo 2013, 2015), and the resurgence of Christianity in post-socialist settings (Hann & Goltz 2010; Kormina 2013), I attempt to do something different by foregrounding the body, the house, the neighbourhood, and the streets of the city as vital sites of religious generation and experience.

Religious discipline and renunciation acquire particular meaning and value for those who live in the crowded neighbourhoods of Addis Ababa and walk its busy streets, where the consequences of the fall are perceived most strongly. Fasting, for instance, is credited with the capacity of taming *cinqet* and its related compulsive concerns surrounding labour, material possession, and the precariousness of urban life. Much as Peter Brown argues evocatively around sexual abstention in antiquity, the person who embarks on fasting "cut[s] the demonic current that power[s] the loud whirl of the world," in order "to bring about a vast silence in which the music of the Holy Spirit might, at last, be heard again" (Brown 1988:xlili). My informants would often emphasize how fasting provides them with an incomparable sense of soothing peace, as well as a freedom and distance from excessive worldly enmeshment, which bodies dominated by heightened fleshly desire and anxiety cannot otherwise attain. Clearly, with its sufferings and delights, fasting is not the expression of a religiosity that defers all rewards and pleasures to the afterlife (cf. Cannel 2006). On the contrary, as Shaw notes for early Christianity, fasting "brings at least a partial realization of the blessing of paradise here, in this life, in this body. Rather than participate in the continual making and remaking of this world (by worldly pursuit and desires [...])," believers participate, albeit incompletely, "in the paradise still to come" (1998:174). If not reversible, the consequences of the fall can be dealt with productively through ritual strategies known to be efficacious and practicable wherever one might be.

This point about fasting could be generalized to all those religious practices geared toward the weakening of the flesh; and yet, many such practices involve food

abstention in one way or another. Such is the case of holy water (*s'ebel*) consumption, which requires abstaining from food for eighteen hours prior to ingestion. In the fourth chapter of this dissertation, I illustrate how partaking of this sacred substance triggers feelings of spiritual relief and retreat, which mirror closely the experience of fasting together and for each other, and which allow for a convivial sharing of blessing among consumers by virtue of water's material portability and divisibility. To return to the salience of intercession, I will emphasise how the pedestrian labour of fetching and carrying holy water for others, and distributing it to kin and neighbours, reinstates the potential for inclusivity in circles of shared blessing, and exemplifies blessing's very propensity for endless extensibility—themes that I place at the centre of this dissertation.

These propensities of blessing are also evident in the intricate relationships binding humans to saints. For my informants, saints present a paradigmatic example of how the battle with fallen carnality can be won. In my second chapter, I explore how saints' exceptionally rigorous fasting, and their closure to the realm of worldly relations—most notably relations of production and reproduction—make them exemplars of purity that are so extreme and close to perfection that they cannot possibly be taken as models for the laity (Bandak 2013, 2015; Bandak & Bille 2013; Coleman 2009). By virtue of this quasi-angelic purity, however, saints can open channels through which divine potency and blessing are made accessible to any believer who invokes their intercession. I will illustrate how, by making vows for close others, believers become constitutive rings in impalpable chains of intercession, stretching from their houses to the divine—making them, too, intercessors in their own right. The efficacy of the lay work of intercession is further revealed in the ways that women attempt to tie saints to domestic units through various strategies of spiritual “kinning”, so that protective blessing elicited by their devotion can be extended to the family at large. Neighbours and kin might also enter into these chains of intercession by performing the ritual giving entailed in a vow on behalf of those who are unable to do so themselves. Typically, in such cases, blessing is bestowed upon the intended recipient—that is, the person who initiated the vow, but is incapacitated from presenting an offering to the saint—but also extended to the vicarious giver. As I will argue in the next section, Orthodoxy's proclivity to form and sustain complex chains of intercession underscores a view of human-divine relationships as not only exclusive, personal, and direct, but

eminently mediated and plural—pointing at the relational character of both this-worldly redemption, and other-worldly salvation.

Local notions of intercession (*amalajnet*) are foundational to religious life.⁴ However, after equal legal status was granted to all religious confessions under the new constitution in 1995, and following the consequent growth in numbers and visibility of Protestant churches, intercession has acquired novel meanings in the contemporary Ethiopian politics of religion (see Chapter One). Specifically, intercession is now charged with the power of a key identity marker in a new pluralistic religious panorama, in which Orthodoxy has lost a large part of its historical privilege (Ancel & Ficquet 2015; Haustein & Ostebo 2011). Protestants, locally known as *Pente*, insist on the necessity of an intimate and unmediated relationship with God, denying the legitimacy of the panoply of Orthodox saintly intercessors—which they reduce to the rank of “human like us.” Orthodox responses invariably consist in a marked emphasis on the miraculous efficacy of their saints—an emphasis which is now verbalized and demonstrated with unprecedented intensity, public resonance and confrontational blatancy (cf. Meron 2015). As such, discourses and practices of intercession are part and parcel of broader contemporary religious polemics (Abbink 2011). These are polemics of which my informants are keenly aware, in which they actively participate, and that inform the self-conscious presentation of their religiosity to various others—including the foreign anthropologist. I will argue that the growing competition among faiths engendered by the liberalized religious market has led Orthodox believers to develop a sharper sense of the borders of their faith. And yet, the process of re-drawing and re-negotiating religious boundaries is one fraught with ongoing uncertainties concerning what should count as properly Orthodox—especially where an ancient church tracing its roots to the 4th Century AD draws increasingly on modern styles, media, and practices in order to speak to modern Ethiopia and modern Ethiopians. In modernizing its approach, my informants lamented, Orthodoxy runs the risk of becoming too “worldly”—or, worse, of beginning to resemble opposing religious

⁴ Mediation has been a central concern for anthropologists of Christianity, who focus on ever-present tensions and uncertainties around the legitimacy and theological status of various means of dealing with the ineffable (Engelke 2007; Meyer 2009; Keane 2007; cf. Cannel 2006). Throughout this dissertation, I use the terms “mediation” and “intercession” as synonyms—though the latter will take priority as I focus on religious labour performed for or on behalf of others, rather than on the role of religious images, materiality and semiotic forms in mediating divine presence.

groups too closely, especially the Protestant denominations that are thought to owe their success to modern religious innovations (see Chapter Six).

A geometry of blessing

As I have pointed out, in contrast to approaches that privilege the most codified and institutional aspects of religious life, this dissertation foregrounds the importance of mundane relationships through which spiritual lives are cultivated and unfold. I conclude this section by briefly clarifying how different modes of engagement with the divine coexist within the larger Orthodox framework.

Eucharistic intake, as many scholars of Ethiopia have noted, is particularly low in contemporary Ethiopia, partly because most believers feel too impure to approach such a potent sacrament (Boylston 2012; Hoben 1973; Levine 1975). And yet, the Eucharist is largely considered to be the cornerstone of the Orthodox faith. The administration of the sacrament is monopolized by male clerical figures, takes place almost exclusively within churches, and is regulated by strict ritual rules of bodily and spiritual purity (see Chapter Four). Throughout this thesis, I seek to emphasise how this vertical model of access to the divine has a more horizontal counterpart: the possibility of accessing blessing through shared saintly devotion and fasting, as well as through holy water that can be carried outside churches and circulated amongst kin and neighbours. Here, rather than the institutional, the clerical, and the masculine, it is the feminine labour of care, the domestic realm, and the diffuseness of kinship and neighbourly relations that is paramount. This horizontal model—and the relative leniency and elasticity it affords in terms of rules—makes divine blessing more easily accessible for a large number of impure, busy, troubled Orthodox subjects, who consider their lives to be marked by profound moral ambivalence at odds with the purity of the Eucharistic sacrament and other demanding forms of contact with the sacred. To echo the title of this thesis, I call the configuration of vertical and horizontal axes of engagement with the divine—approaches that are deeply intertwined and complementary, rather than mutually exclusive—a “geometry of blessing.” In the section below, I underscore the relevance of vertical spiritual relations—and, to a lesser extent, of clerical authority—to the links between Orthodox personhood, conceptions of salvation, and quotidian forms of redemption.

4. Orthodox relatedness, Orthodox persons

From Marcel Mauss (1985) to Louis Dumont (1985), Christianity figures as a driving force in the emergence of western forms of individualism. For Dumont, in particular, “the key pivots of transformation into the modern individual [...] were the theologies of Luther and Calvin, wherein early Christian outworldliness was re-focused upon the penitent inner, indestructible, and sacred but indivisible soul, identified with the will of God” (Mosko 2010:220; see Dumont 1985:112-119). This narrative has had a profound influence on various arguments revolving around Christian personhood in the context of conversion in the “non-western” world. Joel Robbins’ pioneering work on the adoption of Christianity in Papua New Guinea illustrates how, as a result of conversion, the Urapmin people came to develop an understanding of the individual as “the independent, autonomous, and thus essentially non-social moral being who carries a paramount value” (Dumont 1986:25; see Robbins 2002:192; 2004a; 2015). The post-conversion ideological framework is one in which “the individual is not [just] valued” but “is the unit of evaluation”; namely, “it is the individual, not [...] particular relationships that ought properly to be reckoned to succeed or fail on that society’s key scale” (Robbins 2002:189). According to Robbins, the Urapmin’s rapid shift towards this ideology was chiefly compelled by Christianity’s focus on the individual as the bearer of ultimate responsibility for his or her own beliefs, and as the discrete unit of salvation (ibid.:188-198; see Dumont 1986:27). As the next section illustrates, Robbins’ view finds significant echoes in many anthropological studies of Protestant denominations in Africa.

Living in the eschatological anxiety generated by the expectation of Christ’s imminent return, the Urapmin Christian is sharply aware that s/he will face divine judgment as a singular being—since “no one, not even those most closely related to him or her, will be able to lend him credibility” (Robbins 2002:193) in the context of the God’s trial. Nor can believers count on the work of church officials to be saved; such officials might “work for the community”, but “in spite of the fact that they can encourage others to believe, in the end they can only save themselves” (ibid.:197). Although Robbins describes how this individualistic soteriological model exists in tension with somewhat more inclusive ideas of the salvation of the church (Robbins 2004a:278, 294-308), it remains clear that the God envisioned by the Urapmin does not calibrate

His evaluation criteria to collective spiritual units, but is exclusively preoccupied with individual moral purity (2002:203).

At the broader social level, this conversion to individualism, as it were, is at the root of a constant “moral torment” (Robbins 2004a) concerning the negative implications of various persisting networks of obligations that inform everyday sociality:

[M]ost of the sins that Urapmin recognize as condemning a person to damnation are wrapped up with process of social relating—they follow from the feelings of anger, frustration, and desire that arise in the course of Urapmin social life and that move that social life along. Therefore, Urapmin individualism constantly pulls people in the direction of withdrawing as much as possible from the relational world in order to attain salvation. (Robbins 2015:184)

As we have seen, in Ethiopian Orthodoxy, too, there exists a deep recognition of and unending preoccupation with the potential for sinfulness inherent to social relationships of proximity, both spatial and affective. But one might say that Orthodoxy pulls the Christian person in the exact opposite direction of “withdrawing as much as possible from the relational world.” Orthodoxy pulls the person outwards, towards an ex-centric relationality, without which blessing in its multifarious forms cannot be elicited and propagated. Withdrawal from the demands and obligations of kinship and neighbourliness is not only unsustainable, given the multiple dependencies in which people are entangled; in religious terms, the same relationships that might lead people to sin are those on which the believer must act in order to elicit divine favour and accrue spiritual merit. Excessive closure to one’s social obligations towards others is often associated with *tigab* and other forms of centripetal social disorientation, which stand at odds with Orthodoxy’s markedly communal values. Indeed, as I noted earlier, religious discipline and ritual are meant to orient the Christian person towards sharing, cooperation, and altruistic ethical action in general. Relating is difficult: it engenders vulnerability to sin, to the malevolent agency of proximate others, and indeed to demons (see Chapter Five and Six). But, it is precisely this difficulty that makes relational religious work meritorious.

More importantly, in contrast to Robbins’ case, we might say that the Ethiopian God is more inclined to base His judgment on the moral qualities of collective spirituality and socio-spiritual relations. Many members of the EOC would agree that salvation is an outcome of individual faith, merit, and deeds. But there is also fundamental sense in which salvation implicates the synchronized labour of various related believers, and the patronage of a sundry array of saintly beings. A clear example of this relational

dynamic is lies in the collective labour performed by the living, on behalf of their dead, to increase the chance of access to the heavenly realm (*semayawi mengist*; literally, celestial kingdom). While one can never claim absolute certainty as to the state of a given deceased person's soul, giving alms in the name of a saint on behalf of dead kin is notoriously efficacious in facilitating the soul's soteriological progress. Indeed, such forms of ritual giving cannot fail to solicit saintly advocacy for the soul before God, regardless of the deceased's sinfulness. Furthermore, the collective labour of families is crucial to guaranteeing the correct performance of cyclical post-mortem rituals carried out by the clergy, which are similarly crucial to enhancing the of salvation of dead kin (see Boylston 2012). As many of my informants commented, the more money and food is offered to the clergy, the greater the chance for a good turnout of priests who will perform complex funerary rituals with greater accuracy and hence efficacy. We are once again confronted not with an emphasis on the individual's relation to his or her own salvation, but with the instalment of the Christian person in a dense relational matrix, wherein even salvation is an eminently collective quest.

Breaks, connections, realignments

In ways not incompatible with Robbins' argument, studies of Christian conversion in Africa underscore similar preoccupations with the status of the individual in relation to specific human and non-human others, and the "African culture" they may represent (see Meyer 1999, 2004; Engelke 2007). For the Ghanaian Pentecostals studied by Birgit Meyer (1999), for instance, making a break with an idolatrous African past is achieved pragmatically by making a break not just with individual sinfulness, but also with those kin relationships through which ancestral spirits—perceived as demons within the new Christian frame—continue to impinge on the lives, well-being, prosperity, and bodies of converts. In this strain of literature, abrupt "ruptures" and "breaks" have become common tropes of conversion, critical aspects of a teleological trajectory towards becoming a "modern individual" (Klaits 2011; Engelke 2010; Meyer 2004). As Charles Piot observes with reference to Pentecostalism in Togo:

Pentecostalism not only begins to shift religious imaginaries from "traditional" to Christian—from spirits to the Holy Spirit—but also fashions an interiorized subject who turns away from village authority and relational dependency. Untethered from local gerontocracy and the state, this new biopolitical subject—a subject [...] in perpetual "crisis"—seeks its autonomous salvation. (Piot 2010:104)

The reference to a “perpetual ‘crisis’” of the subject points to the fact that processes of conversion and becoming modern are not devoid of deep contradictions and existential agonies. Indeed, despite a marked discursive emphasis on the temporally discrete, radical event of conversion, living as a modern born-again individual necessitates continual acts of distancing and removal from—and re-negotiations of—social obligations with close others (Engelke 2010; see Klaits 2011; Meyer 1998; for counterexamples, see Haynes 2012, 2013; Klaits 2009, 2001). Below, I set out a brief sketch of how the relationship between Orthodoxy, history and kinship can be framed in conspicuously different terms.

In contrast to convert cultures that seek a “break with the past,” one of key challenges that Ethiopian Christians face in the capital today is the question of how to “break with modernity”—or, better, with its most religiously problematic aspects (see especially Chapter Six). This collective challenge entails efforts to re-configure engagements with modernity’s unruly forces, impinging on the country from a “western” elsewhere, in a manner that might allow the selective incorporation and submission of aspects of modernity to the encompassing framework and purposes of Orthodoxy (cf. Oosterbaan 2009). While Ethiopian Protestants are enjoined to make a break with their Orthodox Christian pasts (see Fantini 2015), Orthodox believers passionately celebrate the depth and distinctiveness of their religious heritage—a self-conscious response to antagonistic religious groups in the confrontational post-1995 multi-religious setting. As I will illustrate in my last chapter on public exorcism, being and becoming a proper Orthodox subject also entails multifarious efforts of constituting oneself as a subject with the right kind of past, reconnecting and realigning with an ancient, uninterrupted religious tradition of which every Orthodox believer is a living part and a chosen heir. It is a re-connection which is also instrumental to proclaiming the centrality of Orthodoxy to Ethiopian identity, within a new politico-religious topography where the EOC sees itself as deprived of its hegemonic position (see Chapter One). However, this re-connection is not simply a matter of religious identity politics. Orthodox strategies of breakage and realignment are crucial to individual and collective capacities to elicit divine blessing and mercy. Indeed, access to the divine remains severely hindered under conditions of enslavement by the grip of modern desires, disconnection from the Orthodox living tradition and community, and discontinuity from the EOC’s history—which, for many, is the history of salvation itself.

From questions of modernity and change, my thesis returns to the intimacy of kinship by showing that, in contrast to the African cases sketched above, breaking ties with kin—and especially with parents—is never regarded an act of spiritual freedom, but as the most heinous form of insubordination and sin. From an Ethiopian Orthodox point of view, such breakages would constitute a direct violation of the divine commandment to “honour your father and your mother”, as well as undermining the wider hierarchical scaffolding of the Orthodox socio-moral fabric. In religious terms, while submitting to God and submitting to one’s father are not quite the same thing, I will suggest that the latter form of submission is often deemed as the indispensable condition of possibility for the former—and, sometimes, vice versa (see Chapter Five). Filial piety requires one to submit to parental demands, even when these are burdensome and hard to cope with. Yet, despite the encumbrances of parental authority—or, indeed, because of them—submitting to parents carries the promise of spiritual rewards. Similarly, refusing to care for one’s elders is not just considered morally repugnant but, as one young informant put it, “Such a refusal would certainly make God turn His face away from you,” foreclosing access to blessing. This is yet another example of the deep entanglement, and mutual responsiveness, of the spheres of the spiritual and the intimate, of domestic relationships and relationships with the divine, which I aim to unveil ethnographically. My dissertation illustrates how dealing with the sharp asymmetries of kinship might be especially complex and painful in urban contexts, where modern aspirations for autonomy and self-realization—characteristic of secularly educated youth—conflict increasingly with traditional structures of authority and the hierarchical moral codes embedded therein. Family life in the capital, as I will show, creates novel social frictions and religious challenges that Orthodox Christians have to navigate, negotiating a delicate balance between deference and personal desire in order to maintain a spiritually productive life (see Chapters One and Five).

5. Techniques of the other and the plural fashioning of the Orthodox subject

In his later work on ethics, Michel Foucault focused on the techniques whereby “the subject constitutes itself in an active fashion through practices of the self” (1997a:291). This work-of-the-self-on-the-self follows procedural regimes which are not “invented by the individual himself,” but are rather “models that he finds in his culture and are proposed, suggested, imposed on him by his culture, his society, or social group”

(ibid.). In Christianity, what Foucault terms practices of self-care became progressively geared towards a meticulous excavation of the murky depths of the subject's interiority, exemplified by ritual technologies like confession and penance (cf. Foucault 1997d). Confessional technologies, to simplify, inaugurated new forms of apprehension towards a "self seen increasingly as a self with secret desires—paradigmatically and most persistently sexual desires" (Laidlaw 2002:325). This focus on the less readily-legible aspects of desirous selves taught "people to believe in the reality of something hidden, inaccessible at first not only to their interrogators, but also to themselves, which must be brought to the light of the day as an offering" (Cannell 2006:19; see Foucault 1997c). With its inward orientation toward the unearthing and dissection of desires and thoughts, Christianity is credited with having laid the foundations for the development—the very production—of modern models and practices of western selfhood (1997b:253-254; cf. Keane 2007). Indeed, so the argument goes, early Christian ideologies and practices of self-making contained the embryonic potentiality of "a form of interiority that foreshadows and enables the growth of modern psychological and psychoanalytic regimes" (Cannell 2006:19).

Foucault's theorisation and analytical concerns have inspired—often via Talal Asad's (1993) mediation—some of the most sophisticated works in the contemporary anthropology of religion (e.g. Deeb 2009; Hirschkind 2001, 2006, Mahmood 2001, 2005). What I wish to emphasize is that, in different ways, such works echo Foucault's hermeneutic framework by focusing on the exploration of the aspects of the self that are deemed in need of attention and examination; the concerns that animate self-constitution; the practical means whereby ethical subjects are fashioned; and the teloi and aspirations of self-care itself (Foucault 1997a, 1997d; cf. Lambek 2010a). And yet, as I will illustrate shortly, the peculiarities of the Ethiopian Orthodox context call for an expansion of the scope of ethical fashioning—from inwardly-oriented models, high forms of religious achievement, and individualized techniques of the self, to what I term "techniques of the other". These are practices of subject-formation predicated on multiple forms intercession, mutual relations of care and intimacy, and the other-oriented, communal work of compensating for moral imperfection.

Saba Mahmood's (2005) study of Cairene women involved in the revivalist Islamic movement is a good example of the recent strand of literature mentioned above. By examining the lives of pious women aiming to approximate the highest ideals of piety,

Mahmood illustrates how a wide range of practices—ranging from patterns of prayer and speech to codes of dress—are crucial to the inculcation of paramount religious virtues, such as humility and docility, as well as to the resolution and transcendence of the moral ambiguity inherent in women’s predicaments. This set of practices is embedded in “public arenas of Islamic pedagogy that are critically structured by, and serve to uphold, a discursive tradition that regards subordination to transcendent will (and thus, in many instances to male authority) as its coveted goal” (2005:3). The investigation of this Islamic ethical field underscores significant analytical inadequacies implicit in “western” ideological frameworks. In particular, by locating “agency in the political and moral autonomy of the subject,” secular and liberal feminist theory fails to capture the essence and complexity of practices of self-cultivation that actively attempt to endow oneself with the “will to submit” to various normative regimes and forms of authority (ibid.:7). Mahmood’s ethnography openly challenges liberal “assumptions about the human nature against which” the revivalist movement examined “is held accountable,” as for instance,

[T]he belief that all human beings have an innate desire for freedom, that we all somehow seek to assert our autonomy when allowed to do so, that human agency primarily consists of acts that challenge social norms and not those that uphold them. (Mahmood 2005:5)

As will emerge from the following chapters, virtues and tactics of submission are vital to Ethiopian Orthodox sociality, and the productive navigation of its asymmetric and intercessory levels. While I draw implicitly on Mahmood’s treatment of authority and submission, I find that her approach also presents some critical limitations—limitations that may be implicit in the Foucauldian framework itself.

In a stern critique, Samueli Schielke notes that Mahmood leaves the intricacies of daily religiosity and their relevance to moral subjectivity unaccounted for:

She does tell us the path of piety can lead to conflicts, most notably between the task to serve God and the obligation to obey one’s husband. But the cases she discusses, and the solutions women in her ethnography find, are success stories of piety. They tell of women who work to develop docile pious dispositions, of wives who, in the end, managed to persuade their not so religious husbands of the necessity of their pious commitment without questioning the husband’s authority. (Schielke 2009:36; cf. Mahmood 2005:174-188)

Schielke observes that, like other recent studies of Islamic piety, Mahmood’s work privileges “the complete, the consistent, and the perfect in a way that does not do justice to the complex contradictory nature of everyday experience” (ibid.:26). By restricting ethnographic considerations of the scope of religious and ethical forms of

living “either to a strive towards perfection or a fundamental critique of religious norms,” studies like Mahmood’s inadvertently “reproduce the bias of the committed groups they study” (ibid.:36). Most recent anthropology of Christianity is not immune from similar analytical dangers, especially in light of its somewhat narrow focus on the assiduous churchgoer, the zealot, the activist and the committed believer.

These focal restrictions may fall short of capturing the complexity inherent to the ethical predicament of many ordinary Ethiopian Orthodox believers. The religious lives of many of the people I came to know in Addis Ababa are marked by ongoing, contextual negotiations between religious and mundane imperatives, obligations and pleasures, as well as between the demands of piety and the pressures of material necessity (cf. Mayblin 2013; Schielke 2009). These are people who do not attempt to achieve perfection or high degrees of purity at all times, but who undergo different phases of more or less intense piety in the course of their lives (Schielke 2009). They engage fervently with certain aspects of their religion, while disengaging from and downplaying the relevance of others (see Bandak 2013). The vast majority of my informants fall into this category, and one could even claim that this rough typology constitutes the majority of the Ethiopian Orthodox population.

In the ethnographic accounts of this dissertation, I set out to explore projects and processes of Orthodox self-formation from a multiplicity of angles and points of view: that of the insubordinate youth, the pious elder, the working mother, the urban poor, and so forth. By doing so, in contrast to studies that foreground to the most highly valued forms of religious achievement, I shall attempt to produce a more heterogeneous account that takes into consideration plural, overlapping and at times conflicting ethical registers and values—an heterogeneity that one finds, for example, in more traditional “village ethnographies” (see, for instance, Christian 1972; Mayblin 2010; Pina-Cabral 1986; Seremetakis 1991). My dissertation also focuses on people who display varying degrees of indifference towards religious commitment, even self-proclaimed “chronic sinners” and “bad Christians”, who nevertheless consider themselves—and will be considered in this dissertation—to be an integral part of the variegated collective that is the Orthodox community (cf. Bandak 2013). For many such people, living a productive religious life is often an issue of balancing daily sins with pious actions; of distinguishing, through situated forms of judgment, those temptations that should be avoided at all costs and those to which one can momentarily

surrender (cf. Daswani 2011; Lambek 2010c); or of deferring piety to a later stage of life, taking a prospective stance on ethics and salvation (see Debevec 2012; Lambek 2010b; Schielke 2009).

Crucially, as hinted in the previous sections, many such religious subjects can partially make up for their moral imperfection and lack of religious commitment through the spiritual relationships they maintain with intimate others who perform devotional labour for them and on their behalf. Orthodoxy's intercessory infrastructure and sociality of shared blessing allows a number of believers to take less active stances towards individual piety, and to rely instead on collective economies of spiritual care. More pious individuals may take on the burden of generating blessing for less pious others, thus compensating for their sinfulness and imperfection in a number of ways that will be explored ethnographically in the coming chapters. Clearly, in contrast with forms of Christianity that foreground sincerity as the condition of religious efficacy, the Orthodox Christian's capacity to reap spiritual and material dividends is not exclusively dependent on individual agency, intentionality, or their correspondence with inner states (cf. Keane 2007). Instead, much as Frederick Klaitz notes for Apostolic Christians in Botswana, caring for the spiritual well-being of others and being cared for are ways "of authorizing certain forms of intersubjectivity, rather than" simply "asserting self-determining agency" (2009:3). Orthodoxy's very capacity to engender complex chains of intercession is precisely what enables it to exceed the intentionality of specific individuals in granting access to redemptive divine potency (see Norget, Napolitano & Mayblin 2017).

Following Andreas Bandak and Tom Boylston, I suggest that for Orthodox subjects who navigate religious lives marked by enduring forms of moral ambivalence, what matters is less the outright "cultivation of a pious self and more a concern that one does not deliberately seal off ways to access and plead the divine" (2014:32). Importantly, the corporate management of human imperfection enabled by networks of lay intercession and shared blessing relies on a specific, systemic vision of the good. In this vision, correctness and perfection lie less in the individual and the quality and intensity of his or her religious efforts, than in the broader Orthodox system (Bandak & Boylston 2014)—a system that binds together lay believers in a tapestry of mutual spiritual relations, while tying them to their faith's institutional and ritual centre, the EOC. My dissertation aims to explore what an anthropology of ethics might look like

in a context where the making and remaking of religious lives is not principally a matter of reflexive, individual efforts at ethical differentiation, but a process necessitating a connection to, and alignment with, a religious community, tradition, and church.

The dense relationality in which inter-dependent projects of self-formation unfold reveal another difficulty with approaches that grant primacy to the work of the self on the self. Michael Lambek notes that, despite the fecundity of Foucault's work, he "is not studying the exigencies of" those "actual practices, which [...] entail articulation with other persons, nor perhaps, is he attending sufficiently to those dimensions of virtues like responsibility or cohabitation that respond in the first instance to the call of the other" (2010b:25). In the following chapters, I take up the challenge to listen carefully to this call in the words and acts of my informants, by foregrounding their responses to various ethical interpellations within the spheres of kinship and other intimate relations. As I have suggested, these spheres are crucial sites of the generation and reproduction both of Orthodox selves and of Orthodoxy in general. The deep entwinement of other-oriented practices of nurturing and feeding with mechanics of lay intercession and spiritual care lead us to reframe our analytical attentions around a different set of questions than those raised by individualized techniques of the self, specifically:⁵

How much each of us is part of others and how much my self is determined by the self-making projects or the acts of others, as well as the acts I carry out for, in respect to, or inextricably connected with others, and to what degree such [...] intersubjectivity is locally recognized or occluded. (Lambek 2010b:25)

These are central questions that I will attempt to address across my thesis. Here, I simply wish to reiterate that it is often through relationships with others and emplacement in religious collectives that one can more intensely experience God's love, forgiveness, and power. And it is often through these same relationships that one can be ethically reoriented towards the divine and its precepts (see Chapter Four). In many ways, the process of Orthodox subject-formation is also matter of being *acted*

⁵ Accordingly, my approach to questions of ethics, while certainly influenced by many recent works on the subject, is not primarily informed by their focus on Aristotelian conceptions of morals, virtue theory, or concerns with individual projects of self-fashioning and freedom (e.g. Faubion 2001; Laidlaw 2002; Mahmood 2001, 2005). Rather, my analysis draws largely from strands of literature that foreground the plurality, intricacy, and pervasiveness of various social obligations, with reference to the intersection of traditional anthropological themes such as kinship, popular forms of devotion, and spirit possession among others (see, for instance, Boddy 1989, 1993; Lambek 1992, 1993, 2011; Mayblin 2010, 2013).

upon by social others, and moulded by the concerted religious labour performed for you and on your behalf (see Chapters Five and Six)—a process that might also require varying degrees of active cultivation of openness to external sources of spiritual agency (cf. Kramer 1993; Lambek 2010a; Mittermaier 2012). Nowhere is this sense of permeability to external moulding more evident than in rituals of exorcism, to which I turn last.

6. Exorcism, boundaries, and the enemy within

Luc de Heusch (1981) introduced a distinction between adoricism and exorcism within the vast spectrum of social phenomena referred to as spirit possession. Briefly put, adoricism indicates the veneration of tutelary spirits that regularly possess given individuals, the ritual forms through which such spirits are appeased, and the work done to maintain and nurture beneficial ties between such spirits and their human hosts. Exorcism refers instead to the violent excision of an undesired spirit that ought to be neatly separated from the host and his or her intimate others, over whom the spirit might otherwise exert a malevolent influence. While adoricism has been widely studied in the Ethiopian context, especially in the form of the *zar* cult (see Aspen 2001; Leiris 1938, 1988; Leslau 1949; Messing 1958; Mercier 1976, 1986, 1996, 1997a, 1997b; Morton 1973, 1977; Palmisano 2002; Reminick 1975; Tubiana 1991), there remains a significant gap in ethnographic explorations of exorcism. A prominent feature of Orthodox religious life, demonic possession has often been dismissed as epiphenomenal of mental disorders, and explained, in a reductionist manner, through the lenses of public health (Asfaw 2015; Giel, Gezahegn & van Lujk 1968). The few studies that examine the religious dimensions of demonization treat exorcism as a relatively uninteresting ethnographic object: a simple matter of prayers and ablutions in holy water that amounts to little more than a “therapy of the soul” (Mercier 1979a:118). Exorcistic ritual regimes have been interpreted as inseparable from ascetic projects postulated on severing ties with the “world of man” in order to immerse oneself in the “spiritual” space of the shrines and churches where exorcism is performed (Hermann 2009, 2010; cf. Mercier 1997a, 1997b). Such views, I will contend, obscure the wider implications of exorcism for the possessed person, as well as for his or her family. Specifically, they occlude our understanding of the social, historical, and genealogical frameworks within which possession occurs, and on which demons provide often eloquent commentaries and incisive critiques.

In my last two chapters, I look at exorcism as an essentially relational practice which unfolds on multiple registers: the cosmic, the national, the domestic, and the individual. Through their actions and words, demons speak of and across these registers, realigning them and showing their interdependence in unexpected and creative ways. The fifth chapter illustrates how vexing spirits often turn out to be implicated in conflicts and frictions inherent to specific kin groups. Spirits provide detailed commentary on social relationships, unveil them, and modify them. Through their oblique and ironic revelations, demons cast silenced tensions among kin into sharp visibility, rendering them graspable in a new light and manageable in ways that are unavailable within the social constraints of the domestic sphere (cf. Boddy 1993; Lambek 1993, 2003; cf. Morton 1977). Spirits compel and refocus the collective efforts of families in addressing the conflicts that plague them, and allow family members to share corporeally in the suffering of possessed kin—even to become possessed in turn—thus providing an embodied testimony to the depth and relevance of their mutual relationships (cf. Boddy 1988; 1993). Within this regime of heightened intersubjectivity and inter-corporeality, spirit possession invites families to intervene in the suffering of their possessed kin through practices of spiritual and material care continuous with those outlined in the previous sections of this introduction (cf. Csordas 1993, 1994; Lambek 1980, 1981, 1988; Werbner 2011). Exorcism enables the ritual insertion of individual suffering in socio-religious collectives, where it can find new expressions and meanings, and where the existential burdens of affliction can be shared and diffused among people who are affectively, bodily, and ethically attuned to it (see De Martino 1961). In other words, rather than a matter of individualized affliction and healing, exorcism is a therapy of relationships. If the genesis of possession is often traceable to the host's fraught relations with intimate others, it is only through acting on these very relationships that the intrusive spirit can be excised and the host re-integrated, more or less harmoniously, into his or her family and community (see Lambek 1981; Corin 1998; Pype 2011).

As various Africanist scholars have suggested, far from being a “hangover” of the past or tradition, spiritual entities are integral to the mechanics of local modernities (Geschiere 1997; Krings 1999; Kramer 1993; Lambek 1998; Moore & Sanders 2001; Pels 2003; Sharp 1999). More than merely symbolically expressive of modern tensions and changes, spirits are *constitutive of* the configurations of such tensions and

change—as social agents in their own right (see Behrend & Luig 1999; cf. Comaroff & Comaroff 1993; Geschiere 2013). In recent times, new categories of spirits have emerged in Ethiopian Orthodox churches and shrines. These are spirits that speak of new problems, with a new language that often resembles that of their modern human hosts. Demonic possession is increasingly associated with, and animated by, discourses of modernity, stress, and religious pluralism. Indeed, new spirits often distil and embody recognizable markers of cultural and religious alterity (cf. Kramer 1993), indexing the propensities of modern Ethiopians who are seen to be growing apart from their Orthodox traditions. New forms of public charismatic exorcism take such spirits not as instances of individual sinfulness and vice, but as singular examples of the detrimental tendencies afflicting Ethiopian society at large (cf. Benedicty-Kokken 2015; Leiris 1988)—a society fascinated by the outside world and the modern lures of Protestantism, hungry for secular knowledge and foreign goods.

In my final chapter, I consider exorcism as a public drama that calls attention to the role of Orthodoxy in modernity, producing a satirical commentary on the new inclinations, tastes, and desires of contemporary Ethiopian society, and the unsettling, unprecedented changes it currently faces. This is a commentary that juxtaposes elements of modernity with the firm tenets of Orthodoxy, evaluating the two, and allowing for a collective reflection on which aspects of the ancient faith are negotiable in times of profound social transformation, insecurity and dismay, and which transcend transformation and negotiation altogether (cf. Boddy 1994; McIntosh 2004; Osterbaan 2009; Sluhovsky 2007; Smith 2001; Stoller 1989, 1994; Wendl 1999). The polyphonic drama of exorcism—involving exorcists, demons, the possessed person, and the non-possessed audience (including those who do not yet know they are possessed)—amounts to a ritually orchestrated attempt at policing the indeterminate boundaries of the national, corporate body of Orthodoxy. By demarcating Orthodox and unorthodox spheres of practice and thought, exorcism contributes in creative, often contradictory, ways to tracing the profiles of both an Orthodox modernity and a modern Orthodox Christian (cf. Boddy 1989:308). And yet, these profiles are sketched with uncertain lines. Drawing on Janice Boddy's (1988) study of the *zar* complex in Sudan, I will suggest that despite the authoritative interpretations of charismatic exorcists, there is an irreducible ambiguity in spirits' communicative performances. Possession singles out objects of reflection, hints ambiguously at their polysemy, and

leaves “it up to participants themselves to assign or derive meaning as and where they will” (ibid.:338).

7. The chapters

Chapter One sets out the context of my research, and describes the neighbourhoods, churches, and households in which it was conducted. It traces the history of the relationship between church and state, in order to understand the contemporary conditions of religious plurality in Addis Ababa. Chapter Two deals with the networks of relationships that bind saints, kin, and neighbours. It shows how people try to secure a living while also gaining access to blessing and forgiveness through various practices of intercession. I illustrate how relations with saints allow ordinary Christians to become, in their turn, intercessors for others; and how relations of lay intercession become the basis of relational networks of blessing that extend through the neighbourhoods of the city. Building on this consideration of intercession, Chapter Three examines fasting as a relational practice, often carried out on others’ behalf and for their sakes. This practice is especially significant in urban contexts, given the ever-present temptations of the city, and it extends far beyond constraining appetites for food. Fasting partially compensates for moral imperfections of all kinds, being endowed with a vicarious capacity to generate blessing for other less disciplined religious subjects; and it is carried out as much for others as for the self. Chapter Four deals with the flow of divine blessing into and throughout the fallen world, as instantiated in the consumption of sacred substance. It focuses on holy water (*s’ebel*) as a vehicle of blessing that operates on the body, but is also storable, transportable and capable of spilling out from the sacred spaces in which it is generated, into more mundane settings. This propensity for “spilling out” is particularly important given the restrictions on access to sacred space. The sharing of holy water within and across households, enabled by friends and relatives as much as by the church, adds to our understanding of the salience of lay intercession and networks of shared blessing.

The final two chapters concern the vast recent increase in exorcism in Addis Ababa; and, in line with previous chapters, call for an understanding of such phenomena as essentially communal and relational practices. Chapter Five demonstrates the ways in which exorcism unveils key aspects of family relationships, allowing for a recalibration of authority and intimacy in the family. Possession is revealed as a family

dynamic, in which demons afflict people through their kinship relations; and the cure must also be applied to the family as a whole. Chapter Six deals with mass public exorcisms, in which individual healing becomes an occasion for addressing grander questions facing both church and nation, and in which threats understood to originate from foreign forces of “modernity” are personified in new types of spirits. The intimate anxieties of desire, and the inescapably fraught demands of relationality—evident across the rest of the thesis—become part of a wider cosmic confrontation between God and the devil; and the stakes are nothing less than the status of Ethiopia as God’s preferred land.

CHAPTER I

THE NATION, THE CHURCH, THE CITY, THE FIELDWORK

1. Introduction

In this chapter I will sketch a panorama of the historical, religious, political and economic contexts within which my informants attempt to navigate urban Ethiopian life as Orthodox believers. Given that my account cannot be totally comprehensive, I focus selectively on local concerns and processes that are directly relevant to the religious and social issues I explore in the following chapters. In the first part of this chapter, I trace the intersecting historical trajectories of church and state power, illustrating how they influenced contemporary perceptions and experiences of a multi-religious Ethiopia. In the second part, I foreground some of the challenges, fears and hopes peculiar to living in Addis Ababa, and place them in a wider historical perspective. In the third part, I focus more closely on the spaces and social networks in which I was absorbed during my fieldwork, underscoring focal concerns about the relationship between the neighbourhood, the church, and the household. The last section provides a brief account of the necessities, contingencies, and difficulties that shaped my research and my understanding of local social reality.

2. Orthodox Ethiopia in historical perspective

Far from being a colonial innovation, Christianity was introduced to Ethiopia in the 4th century AD, with the conversion of the Aksumite⁶ king Ezana by Syrian Christian captives (Aymro & Motuvu 1970; Budge 2000). His conversion is one of the oldest examples of symbiosis between religious and secular powers in the history of Christianity, with wide-ranging repercussions for the development of Ethiopian culture. Alice Morton notes that, “in the broader context of national politics, it has been Christianity which has been the main unifying factor in Abyssinian [Ethiopian] history” (1973:51). Today, the EOC continues to act as a key symbol of the ancient legacy of Ethiopian civilization, and its exceptionalism in Africa. Ethiopia, indeed,

⁶ Pre-Christian Kingdom located in the northern part of contemporary Ethiopia.

has never experienced long-term colonial domination, having been occupied by Italy for only five years (1936-1941). The EOC claims the role of custodian of an uninterrupted indigenous tradition that persisted through that occupation, and other times of foreign aggression.

National myths corroborate this exceptionalism. The imperial dynasty considered itself to be descended from the bloodline of Solomon; and Orthodox Christians today are adamant that Menilek, the offspring of the Israeli king and the Ethiopian queen of Sheba, brought the Ark of the Covenant to Ethiopia—where it is still kept in the holy city of Aksum (see Budge 2000). For Orthodox believers, Ethiopia is a “new Israel” and the elected country of God—a position that they support by pointing out the multiple references to Ethiopia in the Bible (Ullendorff 1968).

For centuries, the EOC has proven to be an indispensable tool for various rulers who aimed to extend and expand their power over the vast imperial territory; and, in turn, the EOC has exerted considerable influence over political figures, crowning Emperors and granting them indispensable religious legitimization. Historically, the EOC has also been the main producer, propagator, and custodian of Ethiopian artistic and literary traditions (Levine 1965, 2004). The EOC’s monopoly over religious and cultural life, its capacity to influence state power, and its centrality as a symbol of national identity, started undergoing a slow process of erosion coinciding roughly with the beginning of the reign of the last Emperor, Haile Selassie (1892-1975) (cf. Crummey 1972). The ancient church has now entered a new historical phase, in which it is compelled to confront other religions under new politico-legal conditions of secularism and religious freedom. As I will illustrate, the challenges posed by these new conditions are central to my informants’ daily lives, to their attempts to position themselves vis-à-vis the EOC, and to their efforts to define their religious identity in relation to other Christian denominations in the context of religious pluralism.

The church and the Empire

The history of the relationship between church and state in Ethiopia is one of deep intimacy, direct conflict, and careful compromise. Every ruler of the Ethiopian Empire drew on the church as a source of legitimacy, and tried to co-opt the institution to his political projects (Donham 1986; Ancel & Ficquet 2015; Marcus 1987; Taddesse 1972). However, it was only through the efforts of Emperor Haile Selassie that the

relationship between state and church assumed a more stable profile. Before his reign, the EOC would still obtain its Patriarch from the Egyptian Coptic church. The EOC achieved full independence from Egypt only in the 1950s with the instalment of the first Ethiopian Patriarch under the supervision of the Emperor. The nationalization of the EOC, supported by nationalist educated elites, offered the Emperor the occasion to increase his control over churchly affairs (Meron 2015:58). In particular, the new Ethiopian patriarch was subjected to stricter political monitoring, since he owed his very position to the success of imperial diplomacy with the Egyptian Coptic Church (Erlich 2000). Under this pressure, the EOC started undergoing a gradual process of modernization. The EOC was endowed with a new centralized administrative council in charge of dealing with fiscal issues (Ancel & Ficquet 2015:74). The council managed revenues from a new tax imposed on church land in 1942, which allowed both state and patriarchate to tighten their control of distant parishes (Chaillot 2000). In pragmatic terms, this meant that the “financial autonomy of the churches and monasteries” scattered across the Empire was severely limited, and the appointment of priests subordinated to centralized control (Ancel & Ficquet 2015:74). In the 1950s, the income generated from the newly-introduced tax was used to finance the development of the first Orthodox media, including magazine, radio programmes, and a printing press (ibid.)—media that some of my informants considered the most patent sign of the Emperor’s modernising influence on the church.

Despite having managed to secure the EOC’s national independence, Haile Selassie is frequently accused of having weakened the national hegemony of the EOC by implementing his modernist policies. First, the Emperor allowed “tentative provisions of religious liberty, like freedom of worship, recognition of shari’a courts, and provisions for the registration of religious associations” (Haustein & Ostebo 2011:756). These measures were, however, scarcely implemented. Secondly, the Emperor was directly responsible for a large influx of foreign missionaries, both Catholic and Protestant. Haile Selassie’s sympathy for foreign missionaries was closely linked to his political aspirations: he saw these missionaries as agents of modernization, capable of introducing much-needed technological innovation and secular education (cf. Crummey 1972). In exchange for their knowledge and collaboration in imperial plans, foreign missionaries were allowed to proselytise in the southern and peripheral areas of the Empire, and were granted relative freedom in the

capital. However, the central and northern Orthodox strongholds of the country remained unaffected by missionization, and the presence of non-Orthodox Christians in such areas was scant. Local Muslims were still largely excluded from “legal title to land and access to high-level public jobs,” as well as from the modern education necessary to access to them (Abbink 2011:7; Dereje & Lawrence 2014:288). Although foreign religious groups were allowed to start new press activities, the fast spreading religious media of these years did not dare to openly question the EOC’s dominant position in the national religious panorama.

Far from being a radical secularist—and in spite of being linked to intellectuals who saw the EOC as obsolete—Haile Selassie made several efforts to publically assert his role as defender of the Orthodox faith, and guarantor of its independence from foreign powers. Indeed, while certainly a modernizer, Haile Selassie was remembered by many of my elderly informants as an exceptionally devout man. They recalled how, in the years of his reign (1930-1974), Orthodoxy pervaded every aspect of social life in the capital. People were unaffected by the aggressive Protestant politics of conversion common today, and Muslims were regarded as second class citizens. As an elderly informant stated, “Orthodoxy went unsaid. We knew we were the majority and we were there to stay. The foreign Christians were guests to be treated kindly. But we were in charge.” Even the brief Italian occupation (1934-1941) did not manage to weaken the EOC, despite the occupiers’ persecution of clerical figures who outspokenly opposed foreign rule. As the Italians left and the Emperor re-seized power, an elderly informant recalled, “The EOC became even more passionately celebrated as the emblem of unity and independence of our Christian nation that cannot be conquered because God is with us. The fact that Italians left so soon proves this beyond any doubt.”

The church and the socialist state

In 1974, the socialist regime known as Derg took power through a coup d’état. The new regime’s attempt to dismantle the feudalistic Empire that preceded it involved imposing a change in relations between church and state. The EOC’s pleas to be recognized as the state religion were rejected (Donham 1999; see Clapham 1988). The EOC was further deprived of its main source of income with the agrarian reform of 1975, which abolished its land ownership (Abbink 2011:8; see Bonacci 2000).

Deprived of land revenues, the EOC started relying increasingly on the material contributions of its lay members. From the 1970s onwards, the clergy was paid from money collected locally among parishioners. The resulting increase in the “participation of laymen in the management of parishes” marked a process of “democratization” in the old religious institution (Ancel & Ficquet 2015:78).

The Derg did not aim to eradicate Orthodoxy altogether. Rather, the regime instrumentalised the EOC once more in its attempts to consolidate state power. The EOC’s co-optation to socialist ends, however, firstly required the incarceration and killing of clergy hostile to the new government. Between 1975 and 1976, under the pretext of fighting corruption within the EOC, the Derg began a large-scale purge (Ancel & Ficquet 2015:77; Donham 1999:140-143; cf. Haile 1986, 1987). Patriarch Tewofolos, who refused to cooperate, was accused of supporting counter-revolutionary movements and murdered in 1979—apparently on the explicit order of Mengistu Haile Mariam, the leader of the socialist junta (Donham 1999:142; see Ancel & Ficquet 2015:77). A new and more acquiescent Patriarch was installed under state influence, and new bishops approved by the Derg were ordained. The EOC “had become virtually an arm of the revolutionary state” (Donham 1999:142). The militantly atheist regime used the ramified network of the EOC to “spread its ideology and control over rural localities” (ibid.). The new Patriarch actively promoted seminars in each parish aimed at demonstrating the compatibility of socialism and Orthodoxy. An elderly informant who had occupied a high position in the Derg explained the mutual compromises between secular and religious powers as follows:

The church cooperated in order to survive, and the Derg rewarded it accordingly. Many agreements were made secretly. However, the government never did anything too serious to discourage people from attending the church; whoever says such a thing is lying. [...] The Derg was a little tougher on high officials. I was a general, but everybody knew I was devoted to Saint Michael. Other generals got their children baptized in secret, but I think everybody kind of knew. Only very few people really disparaged religion. You were allowed to be religious and do religious things as far as you were loyal to the government, and this applied also to priests.

Other informants confirmed that no serious decline in religious practice occurred (cf. Bonacci 2000). If anything, “there was even an upsurge in church attendance as people found in ritual activities a shelter from political turmoil” (Ancel & Ficquet 2015:78).

Members of the EOC became acutely worried about the increasing political recognition granted to other faiths. Muslims had their religious holidays recognized; their employment discrimination decreased; their access to education was ensured;

and a number of mosques were built (Abbink 2011:8). In 1974, Muslims took to the streets in an unprecedented public denunciation of Orthodoxy's attempt to represent itself as the state religion, and Ethiopia as a "Christian island in a Muslim sea" in need of state protection (Dereje & Lawrence 2014:286). Protests, however, were quickly contained. Protestant public gatherings also became more common; but fearing Protestants' connection with the western world, and questioning their political loyalty, the Derg closed a number of non-compliant churches and imprisoned many Protestant leaders (Haustein & Ostebo 2011:756; see Donham 1999).

These dramatic changes notwithstanding, the EOC managed to preserve its privileged position (Clapham 1988). Orthodox believers in the capital were still largely immune to the proselytism of other religious groups. They felt that their church was more politically effective in negotiating with the violent socialist state than any other. As an elderly woman recalled, "Religions did not touch each other. There were wars, purges, during the Derg and people left each other alone fearing repercussions from the government that did not tolerate fights between religions." At the fall of the Derg, many Orthodox believers turned more openly to their church, in search of a source of security and stability in troubled and uncertain times (see Marcus 2001). Orthodox Christians also began envisioning more active religious forms of participation in the public sphere, which was now freed from the harness of socialist ideology. New hopes arose among the masses; but soon new discontent followed.

Democratic Ethiopia and the challenges of pluralism

In 1991, the ERPDF⁷ came into power after the defeat of the Derg, and attempted to involve the EOC in an essentially new political project, geared towards facilitating transition to a new multi-party political order. The Patriarch appointed by the Derg was forced to resign, and was later arrested (Ancel & Ficquet 2015:79). The new Patriarch, Abuna Paulos, was elected in 1992, and the re-alignment between state and church became patent. He was Tigrayan,⁸ like the ERPDF leadership; he was a protégé of the Patriarch killed by the Derg; he had been imprisoned by the socialists because of his stark opposition to their rule; and the training the new Patriarch had received in

⁷ Ethiopian Revolutionary Democratic Front: a coalition of counter-revolutionary ethnic movements fighting the socialist regime.

⁸ Ethnic group living in the northern region of Tigray, to which the major figures of the post-1995 government belong.

the US appeared compatible with the strategies of modernization and the “re-opening to the west” envisioned by the new government (see Haustein & Ostebo 2011:760).

The EOC, however, faced new challenges on an unparalleled scale. In 1995, a new constitution granted equal legal status to all faiths, allowing for the greater public visibility of non-hegemonic religious groups, and encouraging their hopes of participating in mainstream politics (Haustein & Ostebo 2011:755-757; Dereje & Lawrence 2014:285; Meron 2015:84). Many EOC members felt deprived of their historical advantages. In the new scramble for Ethiopian souls, a constellation of Protestants churches was most successful amongst all religions. The number of Protestants grew exponentially, from 5.5% of the overall population in 1984 to 10% in 1994, and finally to 18% in 2007 (Haustein & Ostebo 2011:758). As Jorg Haustein and Terjie Ostebo note, “Most of this increase has come at the cost of the EOC, whose share declined from 54% in 1984 to 50% in 1994, and 43% in 2007” (ibid.). The Muslim population remained relatively stable: 32% in 1994, rising to 34% in 2007 (Ancel & Ficquet 2015:83). As far as the Muslims’ situation was concerned, major changes occurred mostly in terms of public visibility, with a proliferation of Islamic symbols and dress emerging in the urban landscape.

During this time, many urban Orthodox Christians became more sharply aware of the Protestants’ aggressive politics of conversion, which had previously affected mostly the peripheral south (see Donham 1999). While new Islamic movements sought primarily to reform local Islam, rather than to gain converts from among Orthodox believers, Protestants saw in members of the EOC “primitive Christians” in need of evangelization. Concerned about the loss of adherents, the EOC “undertook a new strategy of communication and indoctrination,” implementing Sunday School⁹ programmes in a wide number of parishes in order to reassert its historic role and its centrality to national identity and its continuity (Ancel & Ficquet 2015:83). This strategy was also part of an effort—albeit timid—to create more self-conscious believers, aware of the theological foundations of their faith, and capable of contesting Protestants’ erosive critiques of Orthodox tenets (see Chaillot 2000).

⁹ These are typically Sunday classes for the laity, in which priests or lay preachers explain aspects of Orthodox dogma and social theology. Such forms of pedagogy were largely absent in the traditional church school system (see Chaillot 2000).

Founded in the 1980s, the youth movement Mahabere Kidussan (Society in the Name of Saints) sought to support the Patriarchate by propagating its messages in distant provinces (Ancel & Ficquet 2015:84; see Meron 2015). Together with the promotion of a more theologically informed piety, the movement sought to extend rules to the laity that had previously applied mostly to the clergy (e.g. indissoluble marriage; regular communion; pre-marital sexual abstinence; and so forth) (Ancel & Ficquet 2015:84-84; Haustein & Ostebo 2011:763-764). Theirs was a neo-traditionalist attempt to go back to a pristine, imagined Orthodox past, purified from foreign influence and socialist ideology. The Mahabere Kidusan and similar movements had—and continue to have—a particular appeal to the educated youth and the middle class (cf. Meron 2015:66-72). They are now increasingly active in the countryside, where they seek to preserve the heritage of the church through conspicuous donations, and by working against the insidious influence of Protestants. Many of my informants, who considered themselves to be relatively poor, were aware of this middle-class intellectualist wave of Orthodox revivalism, and were influenced by its ideology in different ways. However, the vast majority of my informants remained largely uninvolved in militant activism, and some of them even criticized members of activist movements as “pretenders” (*asmesaywoch*)—that is, people who exploit piety in order to gain connections and social respectability, irrespective of their moral conduct.

In the last thirty years or so, less structured Orthodox associations have flourished. All in all, the involvement of the laity in parish life has seen a dramatic increase: lay people have started contributing more money for the construction of churches, and have become more active in providing basic services to fellow believers, in a conscious endeavour to counter the influence of other religious groups who undertake similar activities. Orthodox discourse posits other religious groups as benefitting from connectedness to international networks of support, which members of the EOC claim to lack. My informants frequently complained that local Protestants were increasingly taking important political and economic posts, and easily finding work in the foreign-run NGO sector, because of their relationships with Protestant organizations in other African countries, Europe, and the US (see Fantini 2015). Many Orthodox Christians fear the existence of Protestant plans for national conversion, a fear that appears more worrisome in sight of the foreign capital to which Protestants have access. The fact

that the new president is an adamant Protestant, and that his late predecessor was rumoured to be a covert Protestant, inflate such concerns.

Similar apprehensions surround the increasing connection of local Islam to the global Muslim community (Abbink 2011). For my informants, the flow of money from rich Arab countries is directly connected to the spreading of Salafism at the expense of local forms of Islam. The government initially made significant concessions by adapting working hours to Islamic praying schedules, allowing more freedoms to shari'a courts, and granting land for the building of new Mosques (Abbink 2011:9). Orthodox residents have been vocal in opposing the construction of mosques, and have engaged in protracted litigation to prevent it. However, Muslim organizations came under increasingly heavy monitoring following demonstrations in 1994, when Muslims demanded the inclusion of shari'a in the constitution, sparking violent clashes with Christian communities across the country (Abbink 2011:9-13; Haustein & Ostebo 2011:762). State controlled intervention involved the incarceration of "radical" Muslim leaders and the suppression of a large part of the Muslim press, in an explicit attempt to favour local, moderate, and politically complacent Islam over militant groups with transnational connections. In the Orthodox imagination, the contemporary global Islamic re-alignment evokes the Jihad conducted by Ahmed Grag¹⁰ in the 16th Century against the Christian Empire. Such views bespeak, and contribute to, a change in the national narrative of Ethiopia as a tolerant country. Inter-religious relations are becoming more tense, and "radicalized Muslims" (*salafi*) are increasingly conceived as a threat to national security. The presence of Islamic terrorist groups in neighbouring countries fuels such fears, and is used strategically by the government to justify harsh internal security measures.

New tensions also emerged when land confiscated from the Protestants by the Derg was returned to them by the ERPDP. This restitution allowed Protestants to expand their physical presence in the nation by constructing impressive new church buildings. Orthodox believers responded by encouraging the laity to donate money for the construction of new churches, in part to reaffirm the centrality of Orthodoxy to Ethiopian society by occupying secular space. The situation has been complicated by the emergence of a new religious soundscape, the theatre of what Jon Abbink (2011)

¹⁰ Grag¹⁰ was a general of the Adal Sultanate, which managed to conquer a significant portion of the Ethiopian imperial territory and impose Muslim rule during the "Adal-Abyssinian" war (1529-1543).

has called an “acoustic war.” The “massive religious noise production” (ibid.:17) of the loudspeakers in minarets and Protestant churches has been perceived by members of the EOC as a disturbance to social peace, and as an undesirable religious cacophony that threatens their right to live in an Orthodox environment. The EOC, again, has engaged in this new confrontation by adopting strategies similar to those of its opponents, broadcasting the mass into secular spaces through megaphones placed on or near church walls. The religious soundscape is further thickened by lay individuals who play religious hymns in their work places, in their shops, or in public taxis—something which adherents of different faiths sometimes find disrespectful.

The ERPDF has contributed to create a new arena for plural religious action in the city. After the controversial elections of 2005 and 2010, when the ERPDF re-seized power by violent means, the country witnessed a dramatic shrinkage in public political debate. Abbink (2011) sees this process as connected to people’s attempts to find alternative civic identities through religious activism. As a result, in spite of the religious density of the city’s landscapes and soundscapes, and the proliferation of activist movements, religious public activity has become ever more heavily scrutinized by the government. In recent years, new religious media that more easily escape state control (DVDs, cassettes, cheaply printed pamphlets) have appeared, circumventing government oversight. The religious messages such media propagate have taken progressively more polemical tones, openly mocking other religions and discrediting their theological tenets. Today, during Orthodox holidays—possibly the only large-scale public expressions of Orthodoxy in the streets of the capital—one can see the youth wearing t-shirts with messages depicting Muslims as “troublesome guests” and Protestants as “orphans” (because they do not recognize the sanctity of Mary) and “foreigners” (see also Meron 2015). The possibility of different religions coexisting peacefully, many informants fear, has become more and more remote. As Fitsum, a young Orthodox man, drily put it, “Everybody is becoming tired of turning the other cheek. Things will get nasty soon.”

During Orthodox holidays, the EOC’s mobilization of large crowds, and their attempts to saturate the secular city with religious symbols and sounds, are potent reminders of Orthodoxy’s greater capacity to occupy public space. No other religious group is so effective in asserting its importance through the “demonstrative potential of collectives of human bodies” (Boylston 2014). Orthodox national celebrations in the

capital are broadcast on national television, and their mediatized images and sounds reach Ethiopians in other cities, across the countryside, and in the diaspora. At the same time, as Tom Boylston (2014) observes, public Orthodox celebrations in the capital, reveal state attempts to appropriate and reactivate central symbols of national heritage, instantiated in the EOC's material markers of Ethiopia's ancient civilization (the Ark of the Covenant, the ancient monasteries of the northern regions, and so forth). However, this appropriation also entails a domestication of "religion as culture" (ibid.): since the government aims to maintain its narrative of secularism and religious pluralism, the symbols of national identity provided by the EOC are presented as part of a shared Ethiopian history, rather than as indexes of Orthodox religious primacy. Simultaneously, the government has also become more concerned with formally condemning the provocative religious messages that Orthodox believers might broadcast through religious holidays—messages that could undermine already precarious inter-faith relations (see Meron 2015).

Orthodox Christians are more active than ever in the production and dissemination of new religious media. "We are catching up with the Protestants who are very clever with technology," said Fitsum. But, as the EOC engages increasingly with new media originally introduced by opposing groups—also in an attempt to appeal to the urban youth—there arise new concerns that the EOC's tactics look worryingly similar to those of their opponents. Many of my informants were explicitly concerned about the delicate boundaries between Orthodoxy and Protestantism (see Chapter Six)—boundaries that, for them, should be maintained and reinforced. The EOC itself has also become warier of new Orthodox movements drawing on Protestant theology, generally labelled as *tahaddiso* (renewal). Members of such movements are considered crypto-Protestant, "plotting to destroy us from the inside," as one priest described it; or as "syncretic Christians," embodying the confusion of this era of religious liberalization. For most of my informants, these issues—which I address in greater depth in my last chapter—are essentially urban phenomena, products of the socio-religious complexity and diversity of the capital. In the next section, I turn to a discussion of the history of Addis Ababa and the challenges inherent to living in this fast-modernizing city.

3. Addis Ababa: a modern capital

Established in 1886, Addis Ababa became the seat of Imperial power only in 1892. In the first years of the 20th Century, the then-Emperor Menilek (1844-1913) envisioned a modern imperial city that could compete with more developed African capitals. The state's bureaucratic apparatus underwent a profound transformation, and traditional authorities were replaced with state-trained civil servants. Fascinated by the technological wonders of the west, the Emperor presided over the construction of the Addis Ababa-Djibouti railway (aided by the French), introduced a national currency (Birr), established the first printing presses, and introduced the first telephones, enhancing communication across a vast and diverse territory (Alazar 2013:275-276). As the country opened up to foreign aid, new paved roads, hotels and modern restaurants were built in the capital to accommodate the needs of new powerful foreign guests (Bahru 2001). Investment in modern schooling and hospitals (again mostly in the capital) were meant to address the country's perceived developmental belatedness, as well as to impress visitors (Marcus 1994). The influx of an ethnically diverse rural population to the city created the conditions for higher degrees of specialized labour (Alazar 2013:276; see Teshale 1995). Yet, rural-urban migration—which still continues today—is now associated with unemployment, and bespeaks an incapacity to absorb newcomers into the urban economic tissue (Fassil 2008; cf. Mains 2007). An effect of this historical migratory pattern is that, as many informants contended, “Ethnicity matters less in the capital”, which is largely unaffected by the ethnic conflicts taking place in other parts of the country.

As an elder informant surmised, “If you look at history, Addis Ababa has always been a place of change. Things changed faster here than elsewhere and you often had no time to make sense of them or catch up with them. Today we have exactly the same problem, especially with all those goods and ideas coming from abroad.” This statement points to persisting tensions between the desire to give the capital its place in global modernity, and the necessity of retaining connection to a strong local identity—tensions historically perceived by governments and citizens alike (cf. Paulos 2008; Teshale 2008). Ethiopians consider themselves to be heirs of one of the oldest African states. No Ethiopian fails to remind foreign visitors that the country was never properly colonized. In 1896, the victory of Adwa against the Italian occupiers injected a confidence in the Ethiopian ethos which, for some scholars, was conducive to a sense

of superiority towards westerners, and shaped a distinctive cultural conservatism (Levine 2004; Messay 1999). Seyoum, a young man living in Piassa, expressed the fraught relationship between conservatism and modernization in the capital as follows:

Here in the capital modernity is stronger. We want to be modern but in our own way. We need things from abroad, and all rulers wanted these things, too. We want to change society and develop to compete with others and become a real political power. But, the risk is imitating the whites: this is happening to people today, especially in Addis Ababa, and it is a disgrace to our special history.

Echoing similar concerns, Selam, a young woman, described herself as “half-modern and half-traditional.” As she put it, “Modernity is good for many reason, but people in Addis Ababa cannot give up centuries of traditions and the gift of independence that our ancestors gave us through their sacrifice. They died to make us proud of being Ethiopian.” She continued, “We don’t have an inferiority complex like other Africans; we have the opposite problem: too much pride.” These tensions between the desire for modernity and pride in tradition run deep throughout Ethiopian history and the chapters that follow.

Faced with problems similar to those sketched above, Emperor Haile Selassie was a zealous modernizer endowed with a sort of double consciousness (Marcus 1987; Messay 1999). Through modern schooling and foreign teachers, the Emperor sought to educate an urban intelligentsia in the capital to serve his diplomatic aspirations, while inculcating quintessentially imperial values in these members of the cultural elite (Marcus 1994:160). He managed to attract an unmatched volume of aid from western countries but, at the same time, his international diplomatic efforts were primarily geared at asserting and guaranteeing the country’s independence from colonial powers—and, in the eyes of many Orthodox believers, to protecting Ethiopia’s sacred history. The same urban elites he trained were nevertheless quick to condemn the backwardness of imperial institutions, which they saw as lagging behind “the forward strides taken by several newly independent African states” (Bahru 2001:213). Fascinated by Marxist-Leninist ideology, these elites started calling into question the relationship between state and church, perceiving the latter as a burden to the march of modernization.

In 1974, the socialist regime diverted the trajectory of Ethiopian modernization by opening up to Soviet ideologies of progress, receiving aid from socialist countries and

severing ties to many western ones. The expropriation of private land allowed the state to guarantee public rental houses and to secure the employment and education of larger sectors of the population in the capital (Donham 1999; see Teshale 2008). The new—and yet incomplete—urban décor of Addis Ababa stood in stark contrast with the poverty of the countryside, plagued by famine and drought, which the socialists failed to address effectively. The Derg launched a large-scale campaign of alphabetization and opened up access to higher education to a higher number of city-dwellers previously excluded from it. A sizable number of people who received modern education during this time now cannot find employment in the public sector. Similarly, many bureaucrats of the heavy Derg state apparatus found themselves unemployed after the fall of the regime, and so did many members of the disproportionately large army (see Clapham 1988). These factors are often used to account for contemporary urban unemployment (cf. Mains 2007). Some nostalgic elders lament that the Derg regime was corrupt, but provided jobs for most citizens, while the current supposedly democratic state is equally corrupt but fails to provide secure employment for skilled urban workers in the capital.

The ERPDF's rise to power was welcomed with new hope by a population devastated by civil wars and systemic political violence. The new government attempted to push Ethiopia into the global economy with unprecedented privatisation and the temporary abolition of state monopolies and price controls (Alazar 2013:279). A number of economic initiatives encouraged small entrepreneurship in the rush to meet the new Millennium Development Goals (Di Nunzio 2012). By 2009, around 70% of the country's budget was designated for infrastructure development, such as a new dam on the Nile, a ring-road and subway in the capital (Alazar 2013:279-280). These impressive structures are regarded with a certain pride, and, shored up by governmental rhetoric announcing an "Ethiopian renaissance" (*hidase*), have fuelled strong nationalistic feelings (Angelil & Hebel 2010). Nevertheless, for many residents of Addis Ababa, the promise of the restoration of an imagined past glory now appears chimeric. In an echo of claims encountered in the Introduction, Seyoum complained, "We need a strong Ethiopia and to develop quickly. But can't you see that these investments leave us impoverished? First everybody has to eat, then we can talk development and other modern things." His friend Mulatu, another young man, echoed him: "Ethiopians are proud of their country by definition. We need to appear strong

with our neighbours. But poverty is everywhere in Addis Ababa. What's the point in impressing others if we have to hide from the world that people are starving?" Pride and defeat, hope and disillusionment, are the existential coordinates of urban daily experience that I explore across this thesis, and I demonstrate how they resurface in unlikely social arenas—like public exorcisms (see Chapter Six).

In the early days of the ERPDF government many of my informants saw the signs of a change prophesized in the Holy Scriptures: "Ethiopia will stretch forth her hands unto God," says Psalm 68. However, today many people wonder if Ethiopia has instead fallen out of grace. Most people I came to know lamented the "economic awakening" that the government celebrates as not just illusive and unjust, but also excessively reliant on foreign models and dismissive of indigenous wisdom. If the imperial strategies of modernization sought to establish national independence, now informants see the government's plans as driven by essentially commercial aims and unscrupulous economic speculation, which benefit only the privileged segments of society. The deployment of a large Chinese work force in the building of the infrastructure described above is the object of constant jokes, as Seyoum explained:

Ok, they work fast and deliver. But then the roads they build break down after two years. The roads made by the Italians are still there intact. We fought for centuries to be independent, avoiding becoming Italian or Russian, but now we are selling ourselves to China. They must want something back, but we don't know what. Nobody knows what deals the government makes. We know only that Chinese people were given a lot of land and that local farmers were evicted.

Seyoum pointed to common apprehensions about the government's surreptitious workings, concerns that the country is being "sold out" to land-grabbing foreigners, and that the majority of Ethiopians are not benefitting directly from modernizing policies—unless they have close governmental ties. As Marc Angelil and Dirk Hebel note, similar lingering feelings of exclusion find material reflection in the very aesthetics of urban space, characterized by an uncanny juxtaposition of skyscrapers and slum-like habitations:

Often in close proximity to poor neighbourhoods yet remaining isolated from the surrounding context, these multi-story buildings with their curtain walls of glass rise above a sea of corrugated metal shacks. What is at stake here with this new high-rise architecture is less an issue of postmodern motifs applied to International style than of an ideology premised on the need to wear the badge of modernity as proof of not having missed the global economic game. (Angelil & Hebel 2010:11)

For many of my informants, this pompous architectural celebration of progress—especially in neighbourhoods such as Piassa, where I conducted much of my fieldwork—evokes the paradox described in the Introduction: together with the new availability of all sorts of goods, local and imported, a constant increase in the cost of living makes life unsustainable for many poor urban dwellers, who are increasingly unemployed or underpaid. Apprehensions surrounding modern housing expand upon this grammar of exclusion. The new condominium¹¹ housing meant to provide a cost-efficient solution to overpopulation in Addis Ababa is often priced beyond the reach of long-term residents, who see new-comers able to acquire apartments as jumping the long governmental “waiting lists.” Some speculate that people from outside the capital get houses more easily due to a governmental strategy meant to punish local residents for their revolts during the 2005 elections. Governmental housing rhetoric insists on ideals of private ownership, urban orderliness, and western-like cleanliness appropriate to a city that aspires to reinforce its role as the diplomatic African capital. Alazar detects further paradoxes in the aspirations of urban dwellers: the same people who often agonize over their attempts to adapt to new forms of sociality typical of the new dwelling environments are people who praise deliverance from slum-like conditions (2013:288; cf. Mellese 2005). After having moved into a newly built condominium, Adanu, a young man living in Piassa, puzzled me with a peculiarly phrased statement in English: “Modernity is modernizing us”. He summarized the ambivalences inherent to the concept of “modern house” (*zemenawi bet*) by noting that:

Now we don’t have to share toilets with five other families anymore, as in the compound houses. But the neighbour is a stranger, who just moved there and lives his life without sharing, just like in Europe. You don’t have a common space to gather in and where women can wash clothes and discuss. You definitely don’t have the same social support from people around you and you cannot rely on them. They barely know you and they won’t be there for you in times of trouble. Ok, you have a private toilet, but what have you lost?

Many residents of the city live in radical precariousness, fearing eviction at any time. A number of “indecorous” neighbourhoods—including various areas of Piassa—have been demolished and people pushed into government housing projects far from the city centre. As Seyoum explained:

¹¹ Condominiums are four-storey buildings, or higher, that provide self-contained apartments, often built directly by the state or under the aegis of the state’s urban policies.

The poor man in the middle of the city will always be able to catch a little daily job here and there, because he is connected and lives in the middle of commercial activity. But if you are sent faraway, maybe you get a half-decent house if you are lucky, but then the costs of transport to the city, where most likely you have to travel daily because most jobs are there, will be higher than what you earn. So, you see? You gain one thing and lose another. Not everything that is new is good.

Continuing with the confidence of somebody who has spent his whole life in Piassa, he added, “There is a price for the modernity deal, and strangely, it is more insecurity... Unless you are rich, of course, but here we are not.” The lives of many of my friends were permeated by an odd, lingering type of nostalgia: one that anticipates the future but fears the loss of the past, recognizing that the city changing before their eyes brought potential, but also that the neighbourhoods they knew would soon “disappear and be forgotten”, as Fitsum sadly remarked (cf. Elleni 2010). In the next section, I will focus more closely on the sociality of poor neighbourhoods of Addis Ababa and the relationship between neighbourhoods, households and local Orthodox churches.

4. The neighbourhood, the house, the church

The social dynamics of neighbourliness and domesticity are central concerns in the following chapters. Here, I shall limit myself to providing a basic description of aspects of sociality that my informants deem central to their daily living, expanding on some observations made in the Introduction, and providing a background for further ethnographic analysis. Below I set out to illustrate how communal life in crowded neighbourhoods is marked by an explicitly articulated ambivalence about intense proximity—spatial and affective—suggesting that it is understood as both a defence against vulnerability and as its very cause.

Neighbourliness

By and large, in the areas of Addis Ababa where I conducted my research, the ethics of neighbourliness imposes social obligations upheld by values of mutual solidarity and cooperation, especially in time of crisis. These values and social obligations are expressed and reinforced in part by different voluntary associations. *Iddir* associations are associative networks in which members contribute a small amount of money on a monthly basis. If one member dies, part of the sum gathered—or its entirety—will be given to the family of the deceased to cover the cost of the funeral. Members of one *iddir* will help with the preparation of the funeral feast and provide emotional support

to the bereaving family. *Mahaber* associations are groups of people who eat and drink together on given days in honour of a saint. Each month, a different family hosts a gathering inviting other *mahaber* members (see Ancel 2005). Ties built through such associations often reinforce pre-existing relationships between members living in the same neighbourhood, or engender new ones when new members join an established *mahaber*.

Beyond these associative forms, voluntary cooperation on behalf of neighbours—ranging from help in cooking and serving guests to monetary contributions—is often expected during marriages or other life-cycle celebrations. When a neighbour repairs his house, the assistance of others is offered unsolicited. Female neighbours frequently gather to drink coffee, discuss personal issues and ways of reconciling neighbours on bad terms, offer help and advice to each other in times of trouble, and equally envision solutions to the problems of the neighbourhood at large.

Mutual assistance is paramount in times of sickness, when it is expected even of neighbours who are not on good terms with those who have fallen ill. Closer neighbours are often required to spend the night at the house of the sick if needed, and to attend to his or her needs “like a family member,” as many of my informants often put it. Similarly, female neighbours assist new mothers during birth and its ensuing ritual seclusion (see Chapter Four), attending to the domestic chores new mothers cannot perform. Failure to reciprocate such neighbourly help is considered a serious offense. I was often reminded that the rationale behind these ethical imperatives was that “tomorrow it can happen to you” (*nege bene*). As Seyoum elaborated, “Taking care of others is hard, but it pays back.” Furthermore, from a religious point of view, the display of reliability—even at great cost, and despite personal conflicts—is considered a duty capable of taming the individualistic and centrifugal drives inherent to fallen humanity, as well as of eliciting blessing for those who take on the hardship of care.

Mutual aid is desirable and religiously meritorious; yet, as will be clear by now, it is also a necessity stemming from precariousness. As Seyoum conjectured, “You need your neighbour. Love him or hate him, you need him. You can’t survive without him, because often you do not have enough to deal with life’s problems alone.” Echoing other informants, Seyoum defined the neighbour as “your life insurance,” commenting

that, “He is near and can help you when you are in need; he can hear you screaming from next door.” Poor people are known to find every pretext to show up during meals at neighbours’ houses, knowing that the codes of hospitality enjoin people to share at least a piece of *injera*¹² even with unexpected guests. Reciprocation of some sort is often expected, but seldom verbalized, and might take the form of helping with the menial labour of cleaning clothes, cooking, and so forth. As Seyoum commented, “In this way nobody gets ashamed and most people fill their stomach at least a little.” Even the poorest neighbours are granted the right to a proper burial or assistance during acute crisis by spontaneous collections of money. Contributions are compulsory, but are always proportional to economic status. Radical exclusion from networks of mutual support is rare, and mostly affects those who consistently display unwillingness to reciprocate the aid and generosity of others.

However, this intense relationality contains its own risks. As Fitsum explained, “A day does not pass without a neighbour asking for some food, help, or a small sum of money. You cannot be eaten away by the demands of others, but you cannot always refuse to help, otherwise you become an outcast.” It is popular wisdom that “being alone makes you vulnerable” (*bichegninet yatekal*). At the same time, excessively intrusive neighbours, described as *anefinafi* (loosely translated as “somebody sniffing everything like a dog”), are a source of constant trouble and annoyance. The social task of navigating neighbourly life is a delicate one of safeguarding some degree independence and privacy, while investing in reciprocity and hospitality.

Consistent with the view of fallen humanity outlined in the Introduction, the saying “the human being saves you, the human being destroys you” (*sew adagnigh, sew atfih*) expresses a pervasive social philosophy of relational distrust. Similar sayings testify to the dangers of intimacy: “the man you can trust is the one who is buried” (*sew mammen kebro new*) or “show your inside [only] to the priest” (*wistun le kesu*). Revealing too much about one’s economic condition, family problems, or individual travails might expose one to the destructive forces of gossip. All efforts must be put into avoiding public derision for failures and public shaming for transgressions—especially given that the transgressions of a single family member will jeopardize the reputation of an entire household. The safeguarding of precarious borders between the

¹² Staple bread.

house and its external social surroundings is crucial in avoiding issues of envy (*mekagninet*). Selam, a young woman, joked that “Envy is the invisible thread that connects one neighbour to another. Ethiopians are envious by definition” As she put it, “We spend too much time in the house of other neighbours. By looking always at the other person, sooner or later you’ll become jealous of something he has.” Envy is often a prelude to hidden resentments and open quarrels; it is seen as a disruptive but ubiquitous social force. Concealment and secrecy are unanimously considered as remedy to these dangers.

Ethiopians take it as axiomatic that those closest to you, who know more about you and your house, can harm you more easily and more deeply—emotionally, or through mystical means. Deception and concealment are thus crucial skills of survival (see Chapter Five). Neighbours can be too demanding and excessively intrusive. In this case the solution is often lying, by claiming indigence or incapacity to help. The needy neighbour might know that you are lying, but still pretend to believe you for the time being, waiting for a more important occasion to be more insistent in his or her demands. Concealing concealment is a social skill in itself—a theme upon which I shall return in various chapters.

These interrelated pressures make neighbourliness “heavy” (*kabbad*) to sustain. “Quarrelling cannot be avoided in such conditions, people touch each other too much in poor crowded neighbourhoods here in Piassa,” said Seyoum. In areas like Piassa, the reasons for conflict are often trivial, ranging from discussions about who should clean a shared toilet or who should repair a leaking common roof. Quarrels, as noted, are the hallmark of sinful humanity, and among the most problematically worldly of activities. Seyoum summarized a shared, self-reflexive concern: “Ethiopians love peace and respect; this is the theory. But then we fight all the time and keep grudges, and everybody knows that.” However, the ethics of neighbourliness, sustained by religious injunctions and ideals, enjoins neighbours to make any effort to pacify conflicting parties; and, in more serious cases, elders or priests are mobilized to mediate disputes (see Chapter Two).

Neighbours also “drag you down” and “keep you low,” as Seyoum put it. He elaborated:

As long you are both poor, everything is fine. Quarrels can be fixed and envy and grudges are small things. But if you prosper and your neighbour stays poor, he will try to drag

you down. All neighbours want you to stay like them: they will praise you if you succeed in something, but despise you inside. This life is hard and that is why it is wise not to brag about achievements and Ethiopians are so secretive.

Seyoum admitted that this consideration does not extend to all people, but that this specific pressure towards social conformity is stronger in poorer places. Economic success comes with new sources of stress, as poorer neighbours will feel they can legitimately expect more from affluent ones, phrasing their requests in the idiom of sharing and reminding their prosperous neighbour of former exchanges. As Fitsum put it, “Being able to keep secrets, even about your wealth, is the essential to your peaceful living.”

Wealth, however, can hardly be hidden or hidden for ever; and, if properly managed, it can also grant a high degree of respectability. Rich people are respected when they handle their wealth gracefully—a trait proper to the old nobility—without humiliating others, and when they contribute generously to collective life according to their means. By comparison, in Piassa, the new wave of *nouveau riches*—and especially merchants who recently moved to the city from the countryside—are often heavily disparaged, deemed to be greedy and unwilling to partake in the sociality of sharing, to the extent of being defined as “hyenas” (*jiboch*). As I briefly illustrate below, concerns about the ambivalence of social and affective proximity similar to those described in this section are replicated in discourses on the hardship of domestic cohabitation.

Domestic relations

Family life is often cast as an intensification of some of the negative implications of social proximity. The Amharic word for family, *betesab*, literally means “people of the house.” It typically refers to consanguineal kin (*zemed*) living together, but might extend to loosely related or unrelated foster children (see Hoben 1973). As I will illustrate throughout the following chapters, hierarchical forms of deference are a persistent feature of familial units (see especially Chapter Five). The unanswerable authority of elders can be a source of great frustration for modern youth, especially when their intense aspirations do not meet their elders’ approval. It is difficult to contradict parents, and inappropriate to quarrel openly with them; submission and silence are considered emblems of proper moral conduct. “Even if a child runs, he does not exceed his father” (*lij birot abatun aykedimim*), goes the Ethiopian adage.

Yet, beyond the frustrations that hierarchy inevitably engenders, as I mentioned in the Introduction, deference towards and assistance of elders are imbued with the highest religious significance (see Malara & Boylston 2016). Seyoum, despite being the son of a notoriously violent alcoholic, told me confidently that, “If it was not for the love and protection of parents, the unemployed youth would be all beggars. You should thank God every day for having a parent and obey your parents as much as possible.” Fitsum elaborated that, from a religious perspective, “Be they good parents or horrible ones, they are your parents. Those who do not have their parents’ blessing will live a tragic life, everybody knows that. It’s a fact.” Selam added that, “Failing to assist parents who are sick or in need will make you an outcast, but what is worse is that it will cause God to curse you.” As I shall explain in the remainder of this thesis, the tension between deference and personal desire—given the sacralisation of hierarchical domestic structures, and the acerbic pressure these often impose—can often make cohabitation unbearable, spurring inter-generational conflicts and thus worsening the chances of sinful behaviour. Indeed, in Orthodox thought, insubordination, quarrelling and sin are conceived as almost synonymous (see Chapters Four and Five). Nevertheless, while reproducing the conditions for sin, kinship simultaneously offers the opportunity of tapping into divine blessing generated by the spiritual labour of various family members—and especially mothers—for other members and/or on their behalf (see Introduction). Households, as I have suggested, should be considered sacred spaces in their own right, units that partake in a division of religious labour that extends far beyond the restricted sphere of the ordained clergy (see Herzfeld 2015; cf. Hoben 1973:16, 1975). Yet, as I suggest below, the relationship between household, neighbourhoods, and local churches and the clergy working within them remain crucial.

Churches

The geography of neighbourhoods is ethically and spiritually heterogeneous. In contrast to the critical worldliness of the capital, churches are “spiritual places” (*menfesawi bota*), whose sacredness is indexed and preserved by severe ritual restrictions regulating access to them (see Chapters Three and Four). More than sacred landmarks in the urban topography, churches affect and synchronize the bodily movements and behaviour of Orthodox urban dwellers. Believers bow in the direction of a church, even when meters away; they make sure to kiss the walls when passing

by; they move in and out of churches with greater intensity at specific times (i.e. fasting times and religious holidays); and they enter churchly spaces or stay away from them according to their state of bodily purity (see Chapter Four; Boylston 2012; Getnet 1998:94-95). People of all walks of life go to churches to seek peace for their troubled lives on a daily basis, soliciting divine assistance in places where God is perceived to be closer to fallen humanity, or fetching holy water for themselves or for kin and neighbours (see Chapter Four). As I will emphasise throughout this dissertation, living a productive spiritual life in Addis Ababa is not simply a matter of belief or scriptural knowledge, but has a lot to do with eminently bodily engagements with the cityscape. As one moves in, around, and toward a church, in order to seek proximity with the higher density of blessing contained within, pious living also entails the avoidance of spaces where sin abounds. Indeed, brothels, places where people chew *khat*¹³ or conduct other immoral activities, are considered “corrupted spaces” (*irkus bota*). Such spaces increase believers’ vulnerability to temptation and, as I show in the next section, expose people to demonic attacks. Indeed, where the moral dirt of sin abounds, demons dwell (cf. Young 1975b; 1977).

Addis Ababa hosts the largest population of ordained clergymen in the country. Priests¹⁴ are integral figures in the city’s landscape, ubiquitous presences in the dusty roads of Piassa and in its churches. In theory, priests are subjected to stricter moral codes and ritual purity rules than anyone else: they are supposed to respect each fast prescribed by the liturgical calendar; they can marry only through an indissoluble religious wedding, in a society where divorce is pervasive; they must observe sexual abstinence before the performance of their ritual duties and prior to their ordination (Getnet 1998; Isaac 1971:249-250; Levine 1965:168-169). In its simplest terms, the position of the clergy in the Orthodox division of religious labour consists in eliciting divine blessing for the entire community, through the performance of the sacraments and various institutionally codified ritual works enhanced by their higher degree of bodily and ritual purity (see Chapter Two and Three). However, priests are not immune to the risks that the excessive worldliness of the capital entails—which are

¹³ A mild stimulant associated with Islam and spirit mediumship, and whose consumption is strongly opposed by the EOC.

¹⁴ Celibate monks, to whom similar rules apply, are considered as conforming to codes of purity with even greater rigours. However, in the areas where I conducted my fieldwork, the presence of monks was scant.

perceived as particularly acute in Piassa. Indeed, my informants often considered urban priests as greedy and driven by carnal passions. But, despite priests' alleged or real degeneracy, their ritual efficacy remained beyond question, as it is divinely sanctioned through ordination (see Hoben 1970:216). While I shall return to this notion in the following chapters, here I wish to briefly emphasize that it reveals an essential feature of the EOC: the church is the repository of unchangeable, perfect and transcendent divine power whose efficacy is unaffected by the individual fallibility of lay and ordained members alike.

Demons and spirits

Demons (*saytan* or *aganint*) are, in a sense, enduring and integral parts of neighbourhoods. Demons attack believers when the sun is high and at night, especially in the vicinity of "corrupted spaces". Certain rivers or trees in Piassa are known to be the abode of malevolent spirits and are as such avoided by residents. Albeit demons often attack their victims arbitrarily, they are said to be partial to sinners, who are more vulnerable to their aggression. Demons cause a vast array of diseases, tempt people into sin, and even take possession of their bodies (see Griaule 1930; Young 1975b). All in all, most of my informants had a very vague understanding of demonology and were unable or uninterested to produce detailed commentaries on various categories of demons (but see Chapters Six).

In recent times, a growing sense of spiritual threat has troubled urban dwellers. As I shall explain in my last chapter, the uncertainties of modern life, the aggressive presence of foreign religions, and political and economic uncertainty are addressed by exorcists who gather large crowds of believers. Public exorcism engages new demons who speak of the problems of contemporary Ethiopian society, and articulate an elaborate commentary on social change, urban life, and processes of secularization. Many of my informants remained unaware of the complexities of this recent phenomenon and largely ignorant about the specific characteristics of the perplexing new categories of the demonic. This lack of knowledge notwithstanding, my feeling is that an increasing number of people are starting to develop an intense curiosity towards new forms of exorcism and their novel demonic pantheon. Virtually all Orthodox believers I met agreed that demonic attacks were on the rise.

Distinguished by some informants from demons, *buda* spirits represented a less urgent concern in the areas where I conducted my research. These are spirits who attack their victims through the gaze of individuals to which they are attached (see Reminick 1974, 1975; Tubiana 1991), most of whom hold specific stigmatized occupations—goldsmiths, blacksmiths, and weavers. These individuals are generally well-known in neighbourhoods and are, at times, excluded from certain aspects of sociality that are considered to increase the chances of mystical attacks (weddings, visits to new mothers, and so forth). I should note, however, that my understanding of *buda* is somewhat superficial due to the fact that many informants did not feel comfortable discussing this very delicate subject: to call somebody a *buda* is today a legal offense that the government takes very seriously.

Even less common sources of apprehension were *zar* or *wuqabi* spirits. These are tutelary spirits, which afflict only certain families and are inherited through cognatic lines. Despite the fact that such spirits are known to cause illness, they can be appeased through ritual propitiation, and turned into benevolent family patrons (see Aspen 2001; Mercier 1986, 1996; Young 1975a). However, this category of spirits is increasingly associated with the realm of the demonic by an urban church anxious to reform syncretic beliefs (see Mercier 1988). Given their attachment to specific lines of descent, these spirits are known to affect only a few families in Piassa and its surroundings; and, accordingly, most people I knew did not feel threatened by them.

5. The fieldwork

My Amharic teachers, the sisters Yetesha Demissie and Mimmi Demissie—both fervent Orthodox believers—were instrumental in convincing me that I could conduct my research in the area where I first settled, and which I have described above: Piassa. Highly approving of my research topic—religion and Orthodoxy, as I would often say—they geared our language classes towards the explication of religious concepts and their attendant terminology. Although not residents of Piassa themselves, the two sisters had a number of acquaintances in the area, and were exceedingly kind in putting me in touch with them. The parts of Piassa where I conducted most of my research were the rather destitute neighbourhoods of Serategna Sefer, Gadam Sefer, Talian Sefer, and Doro Manakeya. Over the months, however, I followed the movements of

my informants across the capital, conducting research in a number of areas that happened to share similar socio-economic characteristics with my main field sites.

During most of my research, I lived in the hotel Taytu, the first hotel built in the country in 1898. Sitting on the porch of this run-down building, which still preserves something of its imperial allure, I attracted the curiosity of a number of people who met there to drink coffee and discuss all matters of life. Their gentle mocking, meant to test my knowledge of Amharic and Ethiopia, often initiated friendships. Primarily young men—mostly tourist guides, petty traders, or students—accompanied me to churches and involved me in their daily lives. They taught me how to bow in front of priests and elders, when to keep silent and when to stand my ground; and they reprimanded me benevolently whenever my questions were inappropriate. The hotel staff—receptionists, waitresses, cashiers, cleaners, and maintenance personnel—also took interest in my research, and decided it was worth talking about religion with me in their infrequent spare time, or in the long evenings when clients were fewer. Some of these people invited me to their houses, offering me the possibility to develop a deeper grasp of their religiosity as well as the quotidian challenges they had to face.

I am still not sure whether the fact that I come from Italy, a Catholic country, made my informants more comfortable. But everybody was astonished that my full name, Diego Maria, contained a reference to the Holy Virgin, and a number of people took delight in asking me to recite Marian prayers in my native tongue. While not Orthodox, at least I was not a Protestant: “He loves Mary, his name is Diego Mariam (Diego Mary),” my friend Fitsum would say when introducing me to others. Nevertheless, people who did not know me well often displayed a certain distrust as to my real motives, hinting that a foreigner asking so many detailed question about the EOC could be a Protestant in disguise, or, worse, somebody who planned to “steal from the church”—a painful image sedimented in Orthodox historical consciousness by the theft of the EOC’s national treasures, taken by Italians, the British, and other foreigners.

Through the mediation of my friends, I was welcomed into several houses where I could meet people who could tell me something important about religion. Many of these new acquaintances invited me to take part in life-cycle rituals or religious commensal gatherings, and insisted that I should visit them regularly. I tried to visit

at least one family every day, even if very briefly. My inclusion in local circuits of commensality, from family meals to religious feasts, was crucial to shaping my research. I soon came to learn that the house is a sacred realm in itself and, for many informants, domestic rituals are as important as what goes on in church. However, not having a house myself, I could not reciprocate the hospitality I received. On many occasions, I tried to contribute to the daily domestic expenses of my hosts, despite their polite resistance, and to help financially in times of crisis. My attempts to level the inequality of our interactions, to the extent that these could be levelled, also included activities such as helping in repairing walls, accompanying elderly people to church and hospitals, and helping children with their homework—though I never felt I had succeeded fully in reciprocating people’s hospitality.

I lived with five families, for periods ranging from a week to a month. I learned that “being alone” was considered a horrible thing that my informants did not want me to experience. Despite my economic advantage, my friends always saw me as vulnerable to the dangers of the city, and went a long way to making sure that I would enjoy some of the security that neighbourliness provides, whilst sheltering me from the hostile aspects inherent to local social networks. Constant health issues, as well as my fear of abusing the generosity of my hosts, always led me to return to the hotel, where I resided for most of my research. Had I lived for longer periods with families, my understanding of unspoken domestic dynamics would certainly be sharper. I attempted to compensate for this limitation by spending as much time as I could spending time at people’s houses, as well as by asking more detailed questions about family issues to those informants with whom I became closer. As will become apparent in the coming chapters, however, domestic life is conducted behind a thick curtain of secrecy that remains hard to penetrate, even for the most eager outsider.

At the beginning of my fieldwork, I recorded interviews with members of the clergy working for the Patriarchate, but I failed to maintain regular contact with them for longer than a couple of months. Six months into my fieldwork, I grew anxious about not having “hard data”—all I had done so far, I thought, was eating, drinking, and chatting with people. I thus asked my teacher Mimmi to introduce me to the priest Qes Ambelu, her soul father. A man from the countryside in his late thirties, the priest agreed to meet me on a weekly basis, and to give me “lectures” on matters of faith, which he allowed me to audio-record. Qes Ambelu took his role very seriously and

often reproached me for not having paid enough attention to our previous conversations. He was equally quick in raising questions about my ethically dubious habits, such as smoking cigarettes, and often commented at length on the loose morality of westerners. However, Qes Ambelu also treated me “like one of his spiritual children,” as he put it. He invited me to his house during many religious festivities, and made sure that I talked to every member of his family. He also showed a certain pride when he took me with him to visit houses in his neighbourhood that people had asked him to bless, or when he introduced me to his fellow priests in the church where he was serving. The other priest I met on a weekly basis was Qes Tekle Medin, a man in his late thirties and the uncle of a friend’s wife. Serving in a church near Piassa, but supplementing his small wage by driving a cab stationed not far from the Taytu hotel, the priest often met me in his car, always ready to leave as a client appeared. He too was very serious about his pedagogical task, and generous enough to give me a couple of free rides.

Various priests in the church of Saint George (Gyorgis), situated at the heart of Piassa, also spent considerable time answering many pedantic questions. The head priest of this church assigned me as a research assistant a young, non-ordained “teacher of religious subjects” (*yeneta*) called Kalem Werk. Apart from instructing me on matters of dogma and ritual, Kalem Werk greatly facilitated my access to other churches, where he accompanied me during several short visits. While I spent a considerable amount of time attending church services or simply hanging around in church yards, I often found it inappropriate to conduct protracted interviews in places where people came to deal with their spiritual travails, or to present God with their most private requests. Nevertheless, through the mediation of Kalem Werk and various priests, many people I encountered in churches agreed to meet elsewhere for an interview.

In the second half of my fieldwork, I started audio-recording my conversations with lay informants—as well as with some religious experts, traditional healers, and members of religious organizations. Interviews with lay people were more sporadic and difficult, considering the encumbrances of their domestic tasks, the coming and going of guests in their houses, and the vivid curiosity of children for the anthropologist and his recorder. I have formally interviewed roughly fifty lay informants, of which at least half were women. Their ages ranged from twenty to eighty, according to local estimations. Only very few of my informants—state

employees, tour guides, or petty traders—were closer to the perceived threshold of the local middle class. They, too, however, described themselves as struggling to make a living. Most people I came to know were of mixed ethnic background, but preferred to identify as Amhara—the hegemonic ethnic group during imperial times, which more deeply influenced the shaping of urban culture. Most interviews were conducted in people’s houses or in a quiet corner of Taytu hotel. Some young women felt uncomfortable being seen with a white man in public, as this—reasonably common—sight evokes specific negative assumptions about their sexual morality. As such, I sought to conduct interviews in their homes.

All of my informants’ names have been anonymized, for a variety of reasons. Given that I have discussed some intimate topics related to sexuality and reproduction with female informants, I have hidden their identities so as to avoid the possibility of mutual acquaintances coming to the wrong conclusions about the nature of our research interactions. During my fieldwork, some people assumed that I paid large sums of money to my closest informants, and this suspiciousness spurred substantial envy—despite my best attempts to avoid it—which I hope to ameliorate with anonymization. Finally, some informants have voiced strong critiques of the current government on condition of confidentiality and, given the current monitoring of any political opposition on the part of the government, I fear that such data might be used against them.

While my study is not strictly an ethnography of Piassa, and while I conducted research in a number of other areas, my understanding of Orthodox social reality has been critically shaped by my neighbours. Indeed, my friends residing in Piassa would often accompany me to other parts of city to interview their acquaintances and kin living there. After our interviews, however, my friends would try to explain what “that person really meant,” where s/he was wrong, and what aspects of the interview were worthy of attention. Had I met different people, with different socio-economic backgrounds and different concerns, no doubt my ethnography would look very different.

Friends and a few research assistants helped me in conducting and transcribing my interviews. I employed Yared, a young university graduate, on a regular basis to transcribe my recordings, which he did diligently between a coffee and a cigarette in

the bar of the Taytu hotel. However, I feel that my best data came from informal interactions during meals, time spent helping repair walls or carrying bags for elderly women going to church. Meeting with friends who regularly sat on the porch of the hotel in the evening offered a platform for discussing my impressions of social life and eliciting further clarifications and elaborate commentaries.

I started attending exorcisms on a weekly basis during the second half of my fieldwork. I visited approximately eight churches and sacred sites where demons are exorcised in and around Addis Ababa. There I had the chance to interact with exorcists, possessed individuals, their kin, and various demons, which often did not refrain from insulting me or accusing me of being there to steal from the EOC. Typically, I would interview possessed individuals briefly on site and, when possible, invite them to meet elsewhere for lengthier semi-structured interviews. I have interviewed at least thirty possessed individuals, some as many as six times. On a few occasions, I was able to talk at some length with their kin and friends.

Two places where exorcism is performed particularly captured my attention. I visited Shinkuro Mikael, a sacred site located a few kilometres away from the city, approximately ten times. Typically, I would arrive early in the morning and leave in the afternoon. I also spent two periods of three and four days each on the site, sharing a house with possessed people and their kin. Many people I met on the site became friends who would willingly tell and retell their story of affliction. I also attended the church of Istifanos, where charismatic new forms of exorcism are performed in the middle of the city, twice a week for at least nine months. Here the exorcist Mihimir Girma cast away new classes of demons “as modern as the people they possess,” as he put it. I was introduced to one of his close assistants by the sister of a friend, and soon the exorcist took an interest in my camera, asking me to photograph his performances. I felt confident in using my camera during these rituals only because the exorcist’s brother video recorded all exorcistic performances and edited the footage into VCDs that were sold on site. Many of these videos are available on YouTube, and I appear in a few of them. I was able to interview the exorcist and a few of his male assistants only once. A young formerly possessed woman became a regular informant, and she was crucial to accessing other people who underwent exorcism and were willing to offer their “testimony” to a foreigner with generosity and excitement.

On two occasions, I followed the exorcist and his entourage on exorcistic tours of Oromo speaking areas¹⁵, a few kilometres outside Addis Abeba¹⁶.

During my research, I was affiliated to the Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Abeba University, which provided invaluable help in sorting out the practicalities of the intricate local bureaucracy. The “Patriarch Office” produced an official letter of introduction that opened the doors of many churches and won the diffidence of many people. Abba Girum, Mihimir Daniel and Abuna Filipos, as well as the late Patriarch Paulos, were incredibly supportive, and without their help many doors would have remained shut.

As my research proceeded, I started reflecting more critically on the fact that many of my Orthodox informants were not necessarily assiduous church-goers, but people whose lives were at odds with many of the church’s proscriptions. Nevertheless, they were adamant in proclaiming their Orthodox identity, and ready to defend the EOC verbally—or physically—if need be. This observation led me to spend more time in bars, billiard-halls, and local clubs, where I met people who were integral parts of the variegated Orthodox panorama but not necessarily the committed, theologically erudite “pious subjects” on which many recent studies of religion have focused. Spending time in the night with sleepy taxi drivers waiting for clients and hanging around with unemployed young people stationed outside the hotel hoping to meet a tourist willing to pay some money for a “city tour” was an invaluable occasion to develop a more inclusive view of what an Orthodox Christian is. Unfortunately, I did not talk to Protestants and Muslims as much as I would have liked, and I cannot claim the ability to produce a comprehensive or faithful account of their views. However, the few interactions I had with Muslims and Protestants helped me to gain a more refined understanding of religious pluralism and to add nuance to the dominant Orthodox narrative I have been mostly exposed to.

¹⁵ Ethnic group constituting the majority of the Ethiopian population.

¹⁶ I also visited two spirit mediums twice a week for eight months. Though I recorded several rituals, and spirit-mediums and spirits alike were very generous to me, this data does not appear in the thesis. Yet, this experience was helpful in drawing contrasts with exorcism. I have also spent a couple of months in and around the city of Bahir Dar. And, although I do not discuss my findings in this area, this period was crucial to sharpening my understanding of what is peculiar about Addis Ababa.

CHAPTER II

FOR THE SAKE OF THE SAINTS:

SAINTHOOD, INTERCESSION, AND BLESSING

1. Introduction

Taika, a woman in her twenties, sat calmly in her house trying to tie together a bundle of long, thin candles, known as *twaf*, used in church rituals. “Careful not to break them,” her mother Eyerus said, glancing rapidly at her from the sofa while watching a local soap opera. “Take it easy, mother, the Virgin Mary does not care if a candle is bent,” Taika replied, with a teasing smile. Her mother stood up, looking at me with a grave expression. Shaking the remote control in her hand as if she was scolding me, she said, “Young people nowadays are careless. If you do something for the saints, you have to do it well. Saints do a lot for you and they do not say ‘people do not care if...’.”

Eyerus was not angry, as I had initially thought while being belittled by her imposing figure; but she was nevertheless serious. That day, Taika was expected to take twenty candles to the Marian church of Ba’ata, to fulfil a vow made by her mother. The candles were promised to Mary in exchange for her graceful intervention in a situation fraught with anxieties and uncertainties beyond the control of both mother and daughter. As Eyerus recounted, “I called Mary and I asked and asked. I did not get an answer, but I kept asking, saying, ‘I know you have an answer my Lady, you are a mother even to those who do not have mothers. Listen to a poor mother like me who begs for the sake of her only daughter. Do not turn your face away from us.’” Eyerus was praying that her daughter would get a visa to study in the US, where Taika’s father had migrated many years ago, having since maintained little contact with the family and having sent money only on rare occasions. Eyerus reiterated her initial point, looking at me, but clearly addressing her daughter, who was still struggling with the bundle of candles: “Not only did Taika get the visa, but now her father said that he will take her in his house and pay for her studies. Do you understand Diegoye [my

Diego]? You ask Mary one thing and she gives you two. Whatever we do for Mary we should do it well.”

Taika intervened gently: “Of course she is right. Mary is very kind and God listens to everything she says. We can only say ‘For the sake of your mother do this for us,’ because God might not give you what you ask if He looks only at your sins, we all have many sins.” Eyerus nodded silently in approval, not without a certain pride in her daughter’s sound answer. “She [Mary] does a lot for you and you do so little for her,” Eyerus added, picking up from where her daughter left off. Taika went to church after kissing her mother, who dismissed her with a terse “Careful!” I went home a few minutes later, and never had the chance to talk to Taika again after she left for the US the following week. Yet soon I learned that everybody in my neighborhood had a story to tell about relationships with saints, and the ritual labour performed in exchange for their miraculous assistance.

* * *

Saints are the “friends of God,” his “beloved” and “chosen people.” They are those who, as the young priest Qes Ambelu put it, “are closer to the Creator because they built a special relationship with Him through their lives that differs from what we expect from a common man.” Ordinary believers perceive a difference between their daily struggle to relate to the divine—marked by moments of acute distance, regular interruptions of communication, uncertainties concerning God’s responsiveness, and the profound sense of unworthiness that sin engenders—and the unrivaled intimacy that defines relationships between God and the saints. As I will illustrate, by virtue of their exemplary Christian lives and closeness to the divine, saints have become highly efficacious and widely accessible intercessors for the entire Orthodox community.

This chapter explores the various ways in which Orthodox Christians attempt to relate to God through the saints. With regards to the interaction between saints and humans, I propose that intercession is best understood as a matter of “doing for.” Indeed, my informant’s supplications to God through the saints often started with the particle “*sile*,” which translates as “for the sake of” (a given saint). The particle implies that God will heed the request of the human petitioner not because of his or her moral righteousness, but because of his or her relationship to a given saint, who occupies a different position in the Orthodox cosmic hierarchy—one of greater proximity to God.

As the conversation above suggests, people might enlist the help of saints on behalf of intimate others—asking the saint to “do something for” others, like Eyerus solicited the intervention of the Virgin for the benefit of Taika (becoming an intercessor in her own right). This “doing for”, I suggest, is a key feature of Orthodox religious action, and displays a peculiar proclivity towards generating complex chains of intercession in which various humans and non-humans are deeply entwined. I will describe and trace these complex chains through close ethnographic analysis of a few select cases. By doing so, I seek to examine the mechanics of Orthodox spiritual relationality and its attending ethics—practices and relationships whereby various social actors constitute each other as religious subjects through their mutual religious labour and their sharing of divine blessing, exacting worldly and other-worldly dividends for themselves and for others. In sum, this chapter examines what people do for saints, what saints do for people, and what people do for other people by doing something for saints.

I begin by illustrating how saints build closer relationships with God than ordinary believers—generally through extreme ascetic quests. I will then highlight how the excruciating asceticism of saints, and their greater proximity with God, results in the acquisition of extraordinary forms of corporeality that are locally understood to be linked to saints’ capacity to intercede with the divine. A saint’s exceptional life and relationship with God, I will suggest, are better understood as forms of sacrifice: a “doing for” for the entire Christian community that opens new channels whereby the laity can access divine blessing. I will then move on to show how my informants conceptualize and articulate their relationships with the saints, and with God through the saints. Finally, I will analyze some ways in which relationships with the saints are cultivated through vows and ritual offerings. I argue that petitioner-saint relationships are deeply hierarchical, and yet not exclusive, as they contain the potential for including the petitioner’s kin, friends and neighbors in circles of shared blessing. At the same time, I will suggest that through their ritual giving, believers do something crucial for saints: they grant saints social remembrance, expand the number of their clients and their fame, thus giving them a social life in the corrupted present. In the section below, I look at the divergent religious careers of saints and laity or, in other words, at what makes saints different from ordinary people.

2. Saints unlike us

Studies of world religions (e.g. Parry 1982) point to the coexistence of divergent paths to salvation and proximity to the divine within the same religious frameworks. With reference to Byzantine Christianity, Norman Baynes detects a “double ethic” consisting of “two standards: one for the ordinary Christian living his life in the work-a-day world, and the other standard for those who were haunted by the word of Christ, ‘if thou wouldst be perfect’” (1960:26). In the Ethiopian context, a similar double ethic applies, differentiating saintly lives from ordinary ones. My informants aspired neither to perfection nor to sainthood. Nevertheless, they spoke with admiration of saintly ascetic pursuits, remaining firmly aware that such forms of living remain essentially unsustainable for those who are deeply enmeshed in the world as they are. For ordinary believers, saints are not understood as providing examples on which life should be systematically patterned (cf. Bandak 2015). Saints are rather, as Simon Coleman writes, “paradigmatic figures [...] exemplifications of religious ideals through self-transformation that may ultimately lead to behavior so extreme that it becomes impossible for others to imitate” (2009:417). Much as Peter Brown notes for early Christianity, my informants found in saintly “figures and lives that divine imprint, the same shimmer of the original and future majesty of man” (1983:8)—a theophanic humanity that reveals the reflected image of the Creator, which informants could not discern with such clarity in their own persons. Saints provide “a touch of beauty and unbroken harmony in a dirty and preoccupied world” (ibid:10). The aesthetic of saints’ extraordinary purity reveals a glimpse of the glorious perfection of God to those who live surrounded by temptation, amidst the pervading moral dirt of the worldliest of all places: Addis Ababa. Saints¹⁷ are radically different from common humans; yet they are widely accessible as intercessors and gateways to the divine, and in this conundrum lies their peculiar value.

According to my informants, most saints did not engage in worldly forms of labour, instead devoting the entirety of their time and energies to the quest for holiness¹⁸—a

¹⁷ In other Orthodox denominations (cf. Kormina 2013), as well as in the Catholic church, believers engage fervently in the veneration of new saints whose lives they may perceive as being closer to their own historical circumstances. The saints to whom my informants resort, however, are figures from a remote Christian past, whose holy deeds are known only through the Orthodox hagiographic literature and popular tales.

¹⁸ The panoply of saints venerated in the EOC includes angels, apostles, local ascetic figures, and so forth. Not all these saints conducted lives marked by such extreme renunciation as the ones described

form of living from which the laity are precluded by the urgencies of their daily needs. Among the laity, the “industrious worker” (*tatari serategna*) is celebrated for his or her capacity to provide for family and guests (cf. Levine 1965:81), and exemplifies paramount ideals of independence and self-reliance. Yet, in Ethiopian Orthodoxy—unlike in Catholic and Protestant traditions—labour is not attributed the redeeming potency of penance (Mayblin 2010); nor does Orthodoxy trace a link between work ethic and divine election (Weber 1967). Labour is a tiresome necessity, but not an impediment to spiritual life in itself. As I noted in the introduction, labour becomes religiously problematic when its meagre rewards and its pressing demands spur excessive preoccupations with feeding and sheltering oneself, narrowing one’s attention to the needs of the flesh at the expense of the spirit. Such a condition disorients human beings’ intrinsic longing for the divine, diverting it towards the absorbing plane of the immanent world. What is more, as Shewaye, a woman in her thirties, underlined, anxieties connected to the paucity of resources are fraught with the potential of sin:

I work hard, but I have a small salary. Sometimes I cannot make three meals for my family every day. The life of the flesh is problematic (*ascheggari*). When you are poor you ask: “How will I eat? Should I steal? Should I take others’ belongings?” And then you see what people have and you might want it. This is sin and you might do what God forbids.

Seyoum, a highly educated man in his twenties, corroborated Shewaye’s view by commenting on an extreme case of which we both knew. He explained that the hardship of labour in the increasingly expensive capital contained what he called “the nasty seed of curse.” As he had it, “The salary people get is a joke. What if you have children and you cannot feed them? Then a mother can become a prostitute and be cursed by trying to do a good thing. Should she give the children away? How ugly is the choice?” In the views of both informants, neediness is a source of penetrating concern, and thus worldly attachment, which increases vulnerability to temptation and imposes unnerving moral choices. For both, these ethical problematics are more acutely felt in the context of urban poverty and precariousness and, indeed, define it.

Another common concern surrounding the fraught relationship between labour and faith has to do with time management in the busy capital. For Belaynesh, a woman in

in this section. However, when asked to describe what a saint is, and what forms of living the attainment of sainthood involves, my informants invariably referred to specific saints who performed excruciating forms of asceticism.

her forties who works two jobs, the burdensome demands of urban labour hinder “spiritual life” by “eating time” from it:

I live by the flesh. Sometimes I don’t have time to attend important religious ceremonies because I have to work. I feel the need to go to church when something troubles me, but I cannot. Even when I go, I have only little time because I need to go back to my family or to work. I try to pray in every free moment when I work, but it’s not the same.

My informants contrasted the uncompromising temporality of urban labour, which often conflicted with the liturgical calendar, with the alternation of working days and resting days dedicated to worship in the countryside. As Belaynesh lamented, “Outside the city my family never worked on Mary’s day. It would be an insult to her. We don’t even wash clothes on that day. We say ‘This day is only for you’.” Similar anxieties haunted other workers, who tried to compensate for their inability to attend to various time-consuming ritual duties in church by listening to religious hymns on their phones during work, or by embarking upon voluntary fasts on top of those prescribed by the church’s calendar. “But it’s not the same” is the constant refrain.

Living lives removed from worldly preoccupations with urgency and necessity, saints were exempted from any such lacerating ambivalence. As Belaynesh explained, “Saints took what God gave them and ate the little they were given by others.” Some saints are said to have lived only on wild plants, or to have stopped eating altogether. For ordinary people, begging is a shameful act; expressions such as “washing one’s eyes with salt” (*aynoch be ch’au mateb*), or “the eye of man is fire” (*ye sew ayn es’at new*), underscore the shame of being seen in such desperate conditions. Saints, however, saw in begging an expression of the highest humility: the transcendence of the societal mechanics of shame in order to prioritise sociality with the divine. Such notions echo themes central to the asceticism of the church’s fathers:

To avoid labour and to make oneself free from the bondage of the field, by begging if needs be, was to show that one had become identified with the “wakeful” beings who feasted on the love of God. It was to step out of the category of the human by making visible [...] the awesome freedom of angels. (Brown 1988:331)

Pragmatically, in the context of Ethiopian sainthood, this angelic freedom meant that saints could become fully available not only to God, but also to their communities, assuming the role of attractors and distributors of blessing and mercy through their total dedication to the spiritual labour of prayer and renunciation. Saints served the people around them as exorcists and healers, extended their vivifying powers to the fertility of crops and prevented droughts, epidemics, and famines—the great reminders

of divine wrath. Their lives were profoundly marked, even defined, by a religious “doing for” the entire Orthodox community. Saints’ progressive disengagement from worldly appetites and consumption (cf. Pina-Cabral 1986) evoked the pre-lapsarian condition of freedom from concerns with acquiring food. Teresa Shaw points out that the fasts of early ascetics produced an imagery of:

The blessed abstinence in the midst of the freely available food of paradise. Normal eating [...] in this context [the fallen world] takes on all the symbolic weight of the fall and the pains of embodiment. Eating is one stage in the cycle of hunger, satiety, and emptying. Humans must continually “make” and “remake” themselves until they are removed from this cycle by their deaths. (Shaw 1998:174)

In other words, several saints are venerated in the EOC because they effectively reversed the temporality of the fall, recreating through their very bodies the initial purity of creation.

Saints’ attempts to make themselves into images of the divine relied less on worldly substance than on the ethereal lightness of the divine word. “They were nourished by God’s commandments,” explained Qes Ambelu. This project of self-fashioning did only not rely on the saints’ individual efforts to achieve perfection; it was rather a project whereby such efforts were directed towards attaining openness and malleability to an external, divine agency. Seyoum explained this notion with a metaphor:

We might think that, like an artist, we can paint a work of art, that is, we can make our life beautiful through our talent and work alone. This is the sin of arrogance that makes you think that you need only yourself to makes something beautiful. Saints were not the painters; they prayed hard and gave up so many worldly pleasures, in order to make themselves into canvases for the painter who is above.

Most of my informants pointed out that saints’ angelic freedom did not leave room for, or was at odds with, familial relationships. “Saints did not have families,” I was often told. To be sure, a quick examination of the Ethiopian Orthodox hagiographic corpus would reveal that some saints were married; but even then, my informants stressed that saints left their families behind to embark on their ascetic pursuits. As Belaynesh suggested, “Saints chose not to have descendants because they did not want to be tied to the world.” The sacrifice of the affection and security provided by kinship ties, as well as of the continuity of descent, allowed for deeper communion with the divine. In the next sections and chapters, I will illustrate how, for the laity, the intricate webs of kinship enable blessings to be produced and shared, and the distance with divinity to be bridged. Indeed, as Qes Ambelu reminded me, “For those who have

families the grace starts at home.” However, he also remarked, that “Of course having children is not an obstacle to salvation, but it might be an obstacle to sainthood.” Kinship and its demands are a constant source of “tests” (*fetana*) of one’s faith. As Qes Ambelu had it:

You know Diego that time becomes scarce when you have children: you have to find time to pray, to work, to feed them, to listen to them and teach them, and so forth. And you know that they have different characters and some will not be like you want them to be, and they will test you. You will fight with them and there might be sorrow and division, which is the opposite of what God wants [...]. Living like a Christian family is very difficult.

For Seyoum, even the unmatched piousness of parental love can engender sin by, for instance, leading a parent to question God’s ultimate goodness after the sudden death of a child. The sin here is one of pride, ensuing from the misrecognition of God’s absolute freedom in giving and taking every impermanent creature as His own possession and the instrument of His impenetrable plan (cf. Messay 1999).

For lay people, respecting all the proscriptions of the EOC verges on the impossible, as they frequently lament. By contrast, saints stand out as paragons of absolute obedience. Every aspect of their lives, each of their gestures, words, and renunciations, cannot be distinguished from divine rule. Selam, a woman in her twenties, observed that the laity are condemned to irredeemable partiality:

It is impossible to respect all churchly rules in modern times. If you get married in the church, you cannot use birth control. If you are a woman you can’t wear trousers. So I go against religion every day, but I love the church. I know I can’t be a saint, but I know that saints are there to help me every step I take.

For Qes Gebru, a young priest born in the capital, a saint’s capacity to embrace the totality of divine law stems from a temporal orientation towards the horizon of eternity—“the time of God,” as he called it—rather than an attachment to the immediate concerns of worldly contingencies:

Those who love the world won’t understand. The world will end, everything is impermanent (*alafi new*). [...] God loves the saints and respects them because they followed each law. Because they understood that this world is like a rented house: meaning, it’s not forever. We might follow one rule and forget another [...] We can do holy things in the morning and sin in the evening.

A constant preoccupation with necessities and uncertainties of urban living is at the root of a current epidemic of “stress” or *cinqet*, which my informants read as another disease of modern worldliness—a condition exponentially exacerbated by life in the capital (see Introduction). In the following chapters, I will explore at length the challenges that the urban environment presents to religious life. For now, I will limit

myself to a few key themes that arose in discussions of sainthood, and that shed light on the distinctions between saints and ordinary humans.

Many informants cast the city in diametrical opposition to the wilderness, the desert, and the countryside—the scenarios in which the saints’ careers of holiness unfolded. A place where temptations are ubiquitous, the capital is at times conceived as an autonomous entity luring people into sin, or, more commonly, as an affective space imposing critical constraints on ascetic elevation (see Chapter Three). Qes Gebru summarized shared concerns about the urban environment as follows:

There are many obstacles, it’s true. Here you see constantly the work of the flesh [sin]. We say “watching is wishing and wishing is sinning” (*mayet memegnet new, memegnet hatiat new*). And here you see a lot of things you desire: wealth, power, etc. You see powerful people living like kings and others starving. You might see criminals living free because of a false witness and good people put in jail. So you might think that this is the best way to live: by the flesh, that is. [...] In the countryside people don’t see so many things. [...] As Dawit said, “if you mingle with thieves you become a thief”. So, it’s hard in the city because you live close to different people: many are sinners, some have different religions and want to convert you... Here reigns the work of the flesh (*ye siga sira yenegasabat*). Even if you can live religiously here, fasting and praying can be difficult.

Many informants told me that they felt closer to God when far from the bursting traffic of bodies, cars, and commodities in Addis Ababa, and thus freer from the grip of desires, temptations, and stress. Butish, a devout woman in her twenties, said that “The saints could hear the voices of angels,” but added jokingly: “Do you think we could recognize these voices amidst this noise and confusion?” Samson, a man in his twenties, lamented that God did not listen to him in the capital. Here, he said, he drinks far too much beer, chases far too many women, and lives the life of the rural migrant focused on becoming rich by accepting dubious moral compromises. As he explained, “Here everybody competes with everybody. The city is fast and sometimes you have to be aggressive and displease God because you can’t be a sheep in a world of wolves.” Moving across a heterogeneous geography of purity and pollution, many informants visit monasteries in the countryside in order to disengage from the lurking shadows of urban worries and temptations (cf. Christians 1972:163). Taika, whom we have already encountered in the opening vignette, contrasted the city’s endless “distractions that occupy your mind with all sorts of thoughts” to the ascetic placidity of saints:

They closed their minds to these things. Their thoughts were only for God and their bodies were purer because they did not act according to the flesh. They were fasting like none of us fasts... Not just during the normal fasts, but as a lifestyle. They fasted also with their eyes, ears, etc. We don’t: we see and hear things that sometimes are the opposite of what God likes. Saints were tested too; I mean tested directly by the devil

when they were alone. But they passed the tests, because they had a strong faith and they could evaluate what came from the enemy and what came from God with a clear mind. We are tested day after day by the kind of life we have here and we are not as strong as them.

While I shall return to the significance of sensory engagement of the self with the world in the next two chapters, here I want to conclude briefly by noting that saints were exceptional because they overcame the moral contradictions afflicting many of my informants. Through their self-sacrifice, saints were able to resolve these contradictions—and as such, they became effective channels of divine blessing, creating new avenues for the laity to effectively address God in troubled times. As I have suggested, the saints' ascetic work described in this section is something they “did *for* the sake” of the entire Christian community. Mediators of divine power and blessing on earth while alive, saints became even more efficacious intercessors after death; and, as we shall see in the second half of the chapter, they also enabled further chains of “doing for”, whereby believers can extend saintly blessing to their intimate others. But before exploring these dynamics, I want to turn to the way my informants made sense of the saints' acquisition and exertion of their intercessory potency.

3. Bodies, authority, and covenants

Saints are above humans and below God. For Orthodox believers, intercession—the capacity of carrying messages across different levels of the cosmic hierarchy—turns on a double proximity: by virtue of their exceptional purity, saints are closer to the divine than common humans; and yet, they retain a sympathetic nearness to fallen humanity. The capacity for connectivity ensuing from saints' positionality, I will argue, is exemplified in the kinds of bodies that saints acquired in their quests for purity, and is evidenced by the relations that such bodies entertained with their environment and its inhabitants.

A notable example of saintly effectiveness in communicating with realms discontinuous with that of humanity lies in their relationship with animals. “Abuna Samuel spoke to wild beasts as we speak to our friend and they obeyed him,” said Qes Ambelu, commenting on an icon portraying the saint riding a lion. Abuna Gebre Menfes Kidus is commonly represented as standing still while offering his body to birds, which feed from tears flowing from his eyes. Various saints are said to have had the capacity to turn into leopards or other wild beasts.

The greater proximity of saints to the divine, instead, is more graphically illustrated by a peculiarly quasi-angelic bodiliness. In her commentary on Genesis, Elaine Scarry notes:

The body is made a permanently preoccupying category in the pain of childbirth, the pain of the work required to bring forth food, and the ongoing unease of any fixed shelter. God accepts their [Adam and Eve] woven refusal to walk naked in His presence and, simultaneously, makes the physical act of eating and generation, work and rest, themselves complex and cutting nets of difficulties. (Scarry 1985:209-210)

As my informants suggested, removed from such nets of difficulties, saints' bodies in many ways resembled the inorganic corporeality of angels—creatures who are described as “not wearing flesh,” thus unencumbered by its burdens. Similarly to angels, saintly bodies were often sealed off from the intake of food, as well as from the emanation of sexual bodily fluids. In their radical strangeness, saintly bodies were living organisms approximating the biological stillness of death—bodies anticipating the after-life in this very world. Sealing the body off from the world allowed the saints to open it to the transformative action of divine power, which resulted in an array of miraculous corporeal transfigurations. To give just the most striking example of human physicality morphing into the angelic, God rewarded Saint Tekle Haymanot with three sets of wings. In sum, embodying the antinomies of life and death, heaven and earth, humanity and bestiality, saints appear as liminal icons of mediation between discontinuous domains whose categorical divisions they transcend and trespass.

Studies of popular Catholicism illustrate how the intercessory power of saints is often explained according to a different logic of embodiment. As Maya Mayblin notes, contemporary Catholic discourse on sainthood focuses on the daily, human aspects of saintly lives (2014:272). The proximity between saints and believers is tightly linked to a “principle of shared physicality”; and “the possibilities for identification” between heavenly patrons and earthly protégés “are exponentially enriched working outward from the intuition that such divine figures had menstruated, bled, wept, drank ate, and felt pain” (ibid.; cf. Kormina 2013). Yet, Mayblin's argument suggests that capacities for difference and similarity, strangeness and identity, are already built into the system of sainthood and are actualized differently according to cultural and historical context. In the continuum between humanity and divinity, Ethiopian Orthodoxy locates saints nearer to the divine end, marking neatly the fracture between ordinary humanity and glorious, quasi-angelic sainthood (see Kaplan 1984, 1986). Indeed, in the narratives of my informants, human aspects of saintly lives are largely downplayed. Even if the

fact that saints suffered is widely acknowledged, their suffering is morally and aesthetically construed as an other-than-human affair: a suffering endured with unmatched fortitude in gruesome scenes of martyrdom; voluntarily undergone in their refusal to abjure God; and stoically accepted as the precursor of making themselves into sacrifices for the whole of humanity, in much the same fashion as Christ.

While the capacity to attain sainthood is inherent to every human being—the difference between ordinary men and saints being quantitative, expressed in terms of ascetic efforts, rather than ontological and expressed in terms of inborn potentiality—saints are decisively people unlike us, as indexed by their paradoxical corporeality. This emphasis on embodied difference, nevertheless, does not weaken saints’ profound connection to ordinary believers. The selfless nature of saints’ exceptional lives and deaths—their sacrifice for all Christians—attested to saints’ active will to become intercessors between fallen humanity and perfect divinity. To reiterate, such a vigorous moral impulse, perhaps more than any principle of corporeal identification, is the hallmark of an intercessory relationship between saints and mankind. Furthermore, saints’ neat physical discontinuity from common humanity is considered a desirable trait by lay believers, as it unambiguously signals saints’ greater closeness with the divine—which is precisely what my informants felt themselves to lack, and what they deemed central to the possibility of saints’ intercession on their behalf.

Mary is often the go-to example for Ethiopians trying to explain the logic of intercession. Despite the fact that she exemplifies many core dynamics of sainthood, her case presents some interesting differences, too. As Qes Ambelu put it, Mary is “special among all specials; heaven’s doors were closed because of a woman [Eve] and opened because of another [Mary]. After all, through Mary we found Christ, and through Christ we found back our grace.” Much like other saints, Mary’s corporeality is fraught with paradoxes: both a virgin and a mother, she has an ambiguous relationship to female biological processes—and did from an early age, as widespread stories of her childhood attest. According to Qes Gebru, a young theologian, she was left in the temple by her parents at age three:

From age three till she was fifteen. For twelve years nobody brought her clothes or food. The angel Raphael came from above with heavenly food. [...] When they [the parents] went to see her every Sunday there was no food but she wasn’t hungry. It is said that clothes grew with her. When she was fifteen, the Jews chased her out saying that she would menstruate, but she never did.

Freed from the curse of Eve, the pure containment of Mary's body differentiated her from other women, as did the fact that she preserved integrity and virginity during her bloodless childbirth (see Chapter Four). However, unlike other saints, Mary was a mother until the very end, helplessly witnessing the sacrifice of her only Son on the Golgotha. Thereafter, she became the mother of all: "the mother of love" (*ye fiker ennat*), as Orthodox believers call her. Seyoum asked with his proverbial perspicacity: "If she is the mother of Christ, and Christ is God and therefore father of all, how can you say that she is not our mother, too?" Mary listens to people's supplications with the "heart of a mother" (*ye ennat lib*)—a heart incapable of remaining indifferent to the suffering of her children. She is described as *ruru*, a term meaning generous, sympathetic and kind; and she's said to have a "tender stomach" (*hod bubu*), a quality exemplifying proneness to help and understand others. Indeed, she is such a good listener that a famous Marian sanctuary is popularly known as *kuk yelleshm Mariam* (Mariam who has no ear wax). Like a mother, she excels in the art of begging and gentle persuasion, subtle tactics of power from below identified with her sex (see Chapter Five). As Belaynesh attested with confidence, "What son would not listen to a mother begging him? Mary begs her Son to give mercy to people all the time." A mother closer to mothers, Mary is profusely invoked during childbirth, where she acts as a "nurse" and a "midwife" for those undergoing labour (see Chapter Four).

As I have noted, intercession is predicated on a double proximity and a certain liminality evidenced by specific types of corporeality. Sainthood corporeality is tightly intertwined with divinely conferred authority. Saints' earthly bodies needed to die in order to unlock their full intercessory potential: at the apex of their ascetic careers, and typically before death, saints received from God a *kidan*—a term translated as "divine promise" or "covenant." As Steven Kaplan reports, "God promises either directly or through an intermediary [...] to answer the prayers and come to the aid of those who observe the saint's cult and honour his memory" (1986:2). A common formula found in hagiographic texts reads, "Whosoever invokes your name [...] I will heed his prayers and demands immediately" (Kur cited in Kaplan 1986:2). For my informants, intercession is itself the effect of a divine deliberation, an official act initiated by God conferring on saints the "permission" (*fekad*) and "authority" (*siltan*) to administer grace and mercy on His behalf. As Seyoum noted, "God will not deny the laws He himself established and we use the system He himself set into place in order to address

Him... Through the saints, that is.” The same logic applies to angels who, despite not having died for the sake of humans, were created *ab origine* in order to perform some of the defining tasks of sainthood, including acting as God’s messengers and obedient executors of His will.¹⁹ *Siltan*, the Amharic term for authority, covers a vast semantic spectrum, but in the context of intercession is chiefly associated with the entitlement to speak and be heard, and with the capacity to persuade a hierarchically higher God. To an extent, the same qualifications apply to the ways in which mediation works in human hierarchies. In the section below, I look at how the ethics of “doing for” are grasped by Orthodox believers—and explained to anthropologists—with close reference to these everyday hierarchical social dynamics, as well as to horizontal notions of care and mutual aid.

4. Exemplifying intercession: proximity, distance, and authority

In order to navigate the complex network of hierarchical relationships composing the Orthodox cosmos, authoritative patrons who can speak on one’s behalf with higher powers are often necessary. For Qes Gebre, “Saints are ladders, and sometime we need ladders to reach God.” Believers might consider themselves too impure to approach God directly, a condition that they often conveyed through the idiom of shame; or they might fear that excessive confidence in addressing the divine whilst in a state of sin might anger God and invite negative repercussions. For many, enlisting a saint as an intercessor is a necessary act of humility, and a demonstration of proper deference—displaying the correct attitude towards God of “loving fear.” Tirunesh, a woman in her forties, commented that despite her best efforts to be a good Christian, “you are human and you sin, even in a minute you can sin many times. So you are scared to talk face to face with God. We then call the saints and we say ‘for the sake of your covenant bring mercy on me’ (*le kalkidanu setel maregn*).” This invocation is not a matter of bypassing God, my informants took care to explain, but of accessing His mercy via a third party, in keeping with rules that bear the divine seal.

Sin is often construed as an act of rebellion that widens the hiatus between the almighty Creator and His insubordinate creatures. Accordingly, the intercession necessary to restore communication and solicit divine leniency is conceived as a process of “peace-

¹⁹ The Amharic term for saints, *kidussan*, is extended to angels as well, as they perform the same functions of formerly-human saints and can be engaged through identical ritual means.

making” (*mastarek*), and it is commonly explained through the metaphor of *shimglina*—that is, elders’ mediation in conflict resolution. As Tsion, an elderly woman, put it:

Two neighbors had a fight. One is rich and powerful, the other poor. The powerful one is angry and he might punish the other because he has the power to do so. The poor neighbor then summons a few elders and begs them, “Please talk to him and make peace before he punishes me.” The elders go and talk with words of respect, and the powerful neighbor respects them because they are elders and we listen to elders. So, because of his respect for the elders, the powerful neighbour will forgive. Saints are like our elders when God is angry with us or when we need His help.

This explanation reaffirms the need for sufficiently authoritative mediators to communicate with and persuade those who occupy higher positions in human and non-human hierarchies.²⁰ Tsion also added that displaying proper deference towards such go-betweens is crucial to obtaining favor from the ultimate power to be addressed. She illustrated this dynamic through the example of *bale siltan*, literally “the one who has authority”, which in this case means the holder of a political office:

If you want to honor the *bale siltan* you will show respect for the messenger he sends to your house. You will give him good food and you will call him lord (*geta*), because he is closer than you to the *bale siltan*. And when he goes back [to the *bale siltan*] he will tell what he found. And the *bale siltan* will trust the messenger. The same with God and the saints.

Thus, to honor the saint is to honor the power he or she represents. And to gain connection to representatives of the highest source of power is effectively to gain connection to the source itself, through authoritative witnesses and advocates. Importantly, the efficacy of saints’ advocacy extends beyond the limits of this-worldly existence. As Belaynesh explained:

When we make a sin [the saint says]: “God please forgive her. Please save her soul. She is my beloved (*yene wedaj nat*).” A man can steal, lie and kill. They make so many sins. So when the soul is in trouble [on the judgment day], it goes to the saints to get protection, because when the soul had flesh [when the person was alive] it was praying to them. And they [the saints] say: “Lord this soul is one of us, save it.” And God will save it because he promised that to the saints.

I will return to the weight of saintly advocacy in the economy of salvation shortly. Here, I want to remark that a full account of saintly authority and efficacy must take into consideration the deeply affective charge of the proximity between saints and

²⁰ Discussion of sainthood displays abundant cross-references to mundane and spiritual hierarchies—to the extent that, as Michael Herzfeld notes, in the “analogies of saintly and patronal relations, it is not entirely clear which is modelled on which, and it is probably easier to assume that both represent a particular conception of the person who is caught between dominant powers” (1992:60). Unlike other ethnographic contexts, however, Ethiopian Orthodox saints are not implicated in the dynamics of local politics or appropriated by secular powers (see, for instance Bandak & Bille 2013).

God. As I mentioned, saints are closer to God because they are His most beloved children. Love here is not an equalizing force, but is asymmetric and uneven. Belaynesh delineated the hierarchy of value within which intercession unfolds through an example I have heard many times: “Who do you love more, me or your mother? You love your mother more. So if I am not very close to you, I will talk to your mother and ask her to beg you to do what I want from you. And you will do it because of the love you have for your mother. This is how the mediation of Mary with her son works.” In this logic, God grants a given favor by virtue of His love for the saints, rather than because of the moral righteousness of the human petitioner who appealed to saintly intercession. In this system, defined by Messay Kebede (1999) as “religious clientelism,” exploiting personal ties with the saints—built through prayers, vows, and pious deeds made in their name—allows one to access divine mercy and blessing despite the most heinous transgressions. The ghastly parable of Belay Seb the cannibal, a story known to virtually all my informants, exemplifies dynamics of clientelism and advocacy in the most graphic way possible. As Seyoum narrated:

Belay used to be a good man, but then he was tempted by the devil. He started eating humans, beginning with his family, till he ate seventy-seven people in total. But one day he passed by a beggar who asked him a drop of water in the name of Mary. He pitied him and gave him water to drink. After he died, Belay was confronted by the angel Michael with his scale (*mizan*). In Ethiopia we believe that Michael will weigh your good and bad deeds on two plates of the scale. [...] So the bones of the victims were put on one side and the drop of water on another... This was his only good deed, remember. Because the bones outweighed the good deed, the devil claimed Belay’s soul. But Mary cast her shadow on the plate with the drop of water given in her name, and he escaped hell and was saved. The point of the story is that Mary is merciful and doing good deeds in her name saves you. People say “she has a tender stomach [she has sympathy] even for somebody like Belay”.

While critics of the EOC see an archetypal injustice in such a tale, Orthodox believers read the story as comforting, demonstrating the efficacy of saintly advocacy and of saints’ immeasurable love for us. In his philosophical account of Ethiopian Orthodox notions of justice, Messay suggests that “God is expected to be just in the sense of rewarding those who obey and worship Him” (1999:203). However, “rewards should be bestowed on them not for their merits, but for their submission, for their acceptance of the role of God’s servant.” Thus, “justice does not [...] implicate equal treatment; rather, it leans towards favoritism” (*ibid.*). God has His favorite people, the saints, to whom He accords the faculty of administering blessing and enabling salvation; and saints have their favorite people among those who, by worshiping and showing deference to them, elect them as their patrons.

In this respect, Ethiopian Orthodoxy stands in flagrant and conscious contrast to Protestant ideologies of grace documented across a vast ethnographic spectrum (e.g. Keane 2007; Webster 2013). Commenting on Max Weber's seminal studies, Michael Lambek notes that "in Calvinism there is no chance of absolution by means of intentional human action," through "taking the sacraments, showing devotion to Mary, and the like. Divine grace is direct, absolute" (2012:350). According to some of my Orthodox informants, Ethiopian Protestants hold a similar view to that described by Lambek, in that they discount the cult of saints as a form of idolatry or as empty ritualism. Protestants are said to maintain that the cult of saints justifies moral laxity and cannot produce access to blessing, as blessing is an exclusive prerogative of direct God-human relations. Many Orthodox believers, instead, insist that serving a saint is itself a paramount act of piety, held in great regard by the One who lent saints their authority (recall Tsion's example of the messenger and the *Bale Siltan*). Furthermore, from an Orthodox standpoint, choosing not to address God directly in times of impurity and sin represents a form of self-humiliation, indexing submission; and it is thus an appropriate and virtuous expression of divine worship.

Controversies aside, it is important to note that in order to describe saints' proximity to humanity (as opposed to saints' closeness to God), my informants eschewed less hierarchical metaphors. Shewaye explained the closeness of saints to their devotees with the saying, "a close neighbor is better than distant kin" (*ke ruk zemed, kerb gorebet yshalal*)—a popular dictum that underlines the necessity of having people close to you who can act promptly in your interest in case of need. As she elaborated:

Saints hear our lament because they are close to us. If I shout in this house, my neighbor will hear and they will come to me because they are closer. That is why we implore the saints when we are in trouble, because they are like messengers who come quickly to you even if God is angry. Today I wanted to meet you, and Belaynesh who is your friend called you on the phone for me and you came. Our prayers to the saints are like phones.

It is the protection of this beneficial proximity that my informants sought. Being under the tutelage of a saint is a way of being exposed to God's glory, to the extent it can be perceived in this earthly life. It is to experience, aesthetically and ethically, the magnificence and perfection of divine power, and to benefit from the security that mediated nearness to such power can provide. Servitude to a saint allows a believer to access a power that manifests its protection in sheer violence against malevolent demons inimical to the human race. Venerating a saint with passionate demonstrations of love and submission anticipates the reciprocation of such love—in the form of

saints' unlimited assistance in all matters of daily life, as well as in matters of one's salvation.

Saints' responsiveness—their willingness to “do for”—is solicited in a number of ways: by making pilgrimages to their churches, eating at weekly gatherings in their honor, observing days of rest on the saint's monthly day, and so forth. And yet, the most powerful ways of building efficacious relationships with saintly patrons entail various kinds of votive promises and offerings on the part of human petitioners. In the remaining sections, I will illustrate the intricate reciprocities that saint-petitioner relations entail. I will show how relationships between a given petitioner and a saint allow for the inclusion of other people into the blessing and protection that the petitioner elicits; and how human acts of devotion and ritual giving are crucial to broadcasting the efficacy of saints, thus granting them a social life and remembrance in the world of the living.

5. *Silet*: saints, churches, and arks

A *silet* is a promise in which the human petitioner asks for saintly intercession, and commits to giving a votive offering if his or her demands are met. Saintly intercession is invoked for all sorts of pragmatic concerns, including, but not restricted to: healing; rescue from poverty; school exams; visa applications; finding a job; success in business; and protection for kin living abroad. The choice of the saintly patron for such intercessions can be contingent upon a number of unpredictable circumstances—such as bumping into an icon of Mary while in a moment of crisis—or can draw upon pre-existing individual or familial ties to a given saint. More rarely, saints are invoked because of their specific capacity for dealing with certain issues: Mary helps during birth; Saint John heals wounds; Saint Michael repels demons. But every saint is capable of performing any such task, and in Ethiopian Orthodoxy, the degree of specialization is much lower than in other Christian traditions (cf. Amitrano-Savarese 1995).²¹

The transaction between saint and petitioner is markedly contractual, grounded in a logic of the *do ut des* that, as Jonathan Parry suggests, has developed in Christianity

²¹ The exception is represented by Mary's invocation during childbirth, which, as one midwife put it, is “automatic.” Yet, during labour, other saints are commonly invoked, too. Few informants suggest that in rural areas specific saints are more closely associated with specific problems.

alongside “universalistic conceptions of purely disinterested giving” (1986:468; cf. Eade & Sallnow 1991:25; Mayblin 2010:91-92). To make a promise is to commit to a specific relationship that binds the initiator to external criteria of efficacy, evaluation, and felicity, irrespective of his or her state of mind or changes of mind (Lambek 2010c; Rappaport 1999). The human petitioner who fails to reciprocate the miraculous help of a saint will not only attract negative social judgment, but risks provoking divine wrath. Saints, as I will show, demand an absolute fealty and servitude—which is, as I will suggest, the only thing that the petitioner has to offer a saintly patron. Let me now turn to a description of the basic dynamics of reciprocity in *silet* and offer an interpretation of their symbolic significance and ritual logic.

Typically, *silet* is initiated with a pledge to give a ritual item to a saint’s eponymous church in exchange for miraculous assistance. The most common offering is candles. When Selam, a young woman, got sick with typhoid in a city in southern Ethiopia, far from her family in the capital, she prayed: “Saint Tekle Haymanot, I am alone without a father to protect me and I am scared to die. Be a father to me and heal me. I will be a daughter to you and bring a bundle of candles to your church to praise your mercy.” She resorted to this specific saint knowing that he had previously healed her mother, who had since given frequent offerings to him, and hoping that, as she put it, “The saint would remember her [the mother] and be kind to me.” Selam was particularly scared because during her sickness, her kin were far away, and she felt that in such extreme precariousness and solitude, “A young girl needs not just to be healed but to be protected from strangers.” When she recovered, she handed the promised candles to a priest serving in a church consecrated to Saint Tekle Haymanot, and considered herself exempted from further obligations.

Umbrellas, locally known as *tila* (shadow), are also common votive offerings. Specifically, umbrellas are construed as offerings to the *tabot*—a replica of the Ark of the Covenant kept in the sancta sanctorum of each church, accessible only to the clergy. The presence of a *tabot* dedicated to a given saint consecrates a church and confers its name. The *tabot* leaves the church only during Epiphany (*timket*) and the yearly celebration of the saint to whom the church is consecrated. *Tabot* and saints are conceived as coextensive: the *tabot* is considered the material actualization of the saint’s power; *tabot* and saint are said to have the same character; and, in local parlance, to honor a *tabot* is to honor the saint whose name is engraved into it. When

Eskader, a woman in her forties, learned that her daughter had been taken to hospital after the bus she was in fell off a cliff. Eskader supplicated Saint Gabriel to save her child's life: "Gabriel my protector, I have made many vows to you out of love. Save this child who is also your daughter, and we shall bring shadow to your *tabot*." Eskader recalled this story to me in visible distress, adding, "When you cannot control things and you are far you immediately turn to the saints out of desperation. You cannot hesitate one moment." When her daughter recovered, Eskader ordered the girl to follow the procession of Gabriel's *tabot* with an umbrella during the yearly celebration of the saint, and to give the umbrella to the priest officiating in a church consecrated to Gabriel afterwards.

These offerings are not devoid of symbolic significance, even though there is considerable ambiguity around what a given offering symbolises. When I asked Selam about the specific meaning of candles, she noted only that they were meant "to show my love and to bring light to the saint's church." Priestly views were slightly more elaborate: according to some priests, the three candles employed during the performance of the Eucharistic sacrament symbolize the Trinity; according to others, three candles are symbolic of the flesh and blood of Christ, as well as the water that gushed from his pierced side during crucifixion. Mihimir Kalem Werk, a teacher of religious subjects, added that candles are symbolic of the saints themselves: "A candle gives light by dying. In the same way, saints died in order to save us, to give us light." A similar analogy is often applied to frankincense (*ethan*), another common offering in *silet*, which for Shewaye is a symbol of "our prayers reaching God like the smoke going above when the frankincense burns." For Qes Ambelu, "Frankincense produces smoke that is intangible like the Holy Spirit." When the *tabot* leaves the church, it is sheltered from the impurity of the world and ordinary believers by decorated clothes in which it is carefully wrapped and umbrellas are held above it. For Qes Ambelu, "We hold umbrella above the *tabot* because it has to be kept separate from worldly things, since it has a higher value. But the umbrella has a meaning: you cannot touch the Holy Spirit like you cannot touch the shadow, and yet the Spirit is above all of us."

A common feature of these offerings is that they all symbolize aspects of the divine entities addressed—be they God, the ultimate source of blessing, or the saints, the mediators of blessing. Such ritual offerings also point to the relationships that saints and God entertain with fallen humanity. Thus, the Holy Spirit is intangible and

pervasive, like a shadow; and, like the umbrella that casts the shadow, it sits above and encompasses humanity. Candles symbolize the light brought to the world by the saints' deaths, and also the salvific sacrifice they performed for all sinners. The symbolism of *silet* might also represent human yearning towards the divine, like the smoke of frankincense echoes prayers seeking God. Tom Boylston (2012) rightly suggests that Ethiopian Orthodox signs produce what they represent, creating connection with the divine by their mere indication of it. Similarly, with reference to the Hawaiian sacrificial system, Valerio Valeri argues that sacrificial gifts are "efficacious representations" in that, presented as tokens of a relationship between God and man, they evoke the very relationship that they presuppose—creating and recreating the relationship by instantiating it (Valeri 1985:63). *Silet* can also be understood as producing a connection between the parties who are symbolized by ritual offerings and involved in a ritual transaction; *silet* represents the very connectivity it aims to achieve.

At the same time, such a dissection of the various layers of symbolic meaning in a given offering remains of scarce interest to many of my informants. Even theologically sophisticated priests have admonished me that an excessively strict focus on deciphering semiotic references—typical of overeager anthropologists, I assume—could make me miss important features of *silet*. Qes Filipos, a well-respected theologian trained abroad, invited me to rethink what a symbol is:

What is a symbol similar too? To a kiss. Let us say you meet a beautiful Ethiopian woman and you don't speak Amharic. You fall in love and give her a kiss. You don't need to send her a letter in Amharic explaining what you meant with your kiss, because the kiss explains itself: it reveals your love and the relationship of love you have. But, also, your love is more than a letter and more than a kiss...

This analogy suggests that an offering, like a symbol, remains a token of a sentiment and relational commitment whose totality can hardly be encompassed by the given item itself. Ritual offerings are expressions of gratitude and love that are deeply felt, and yet asymmetric: affection for a patron is one characterized by servile respect. This servitude, I argue, is the greatest thing that humans can offer to saints. Indeed, saints are said to demand and be pleased only by fealty and submission. My informants concurred that giving to a saint is an essentially different practice than giving to a human being, in that saints can never directly receive a material item, nor can they possibly use it. Given this impossibility, human counter-gifts refract onto churches. Giving to a church involves contributing to the ritual capacity and prestige of the place

consecrated to the saint, where he or she is honored throughout the year. Thus, to honor the church *is* to honor the saint. Furthermore, as Joao Pina-Cabral observes in the context of Portuguese Catholicism:

Ex-votos not only bear witness to a relationship of reciprocity; they are also forms of validation of the saint's power. They are hung in public spaces as testimonies to the past occurrence of divine influence on human affairs [...] The believer's counter-gift consists predominantly in demonstrating to the world that the saint is *miraculoso* (miraculous). This is thought to increase the saint's prestige and please him. (Pina-Cabral 1986:168-169)

Though *silet* might have less public resonance than Catholic ex-votos, in both, the human giver broadcasts the social persona and efficacy of the saint through the visible act of giving, witnessed by others (in churches, at home, in the neighborhood) (cf. Bandak 2013:130). As in the Maussian paradigm, in giving *silet*, one truly gives oneself: the giver performatively constitutes herself as the faithful servant of the saint, and such servitude enlarges the saints' fame. People passionately tell and retell stories of their successful vows, regaling family, friends, and foreign anthropologists, and making the saint's power and sympathy widely known. The recipients of saintly assistance often recommend the saint to people with problems similar to theirs, potentially providing new petitioners for their saintly protector. Through these acts, the saint's protégés also give the saints a social life in this world by granting them a durable and shared social remembrance—something that, in Ethiopian Orthodox society, is the exclusive prerogative of very few categories of dead persons, including kings and national heroes. As such, as Andreas Bandak notes, the petitioner's acts “can also be seen as a defense against [...] forgetfulness and neglect” (2013:137); the status of the petitioner is thus “transformed from being a mere passive recipient to an active proponent and hence a part of divine history as it manifests itself over time” (ibid.:140).

As Seyoum pointed out to me in his characteristically analytical way, ritual offerings are part of a larger human “doing for” the entire Orthodox community as well, if indirectly. In his view, votive offerings are entangled in a circular economy of sorts. Ritual items that believers buy outside churches are then donated to a church, which acquires something that can be used for liturgical purposes or resold for monetary gain. When the item offered is instead bought from the same church to which it is eventually returned, the church retains a ritual item while making a profit, too. In either case, the capital generated is used to pay the salary of priests or other churchly expenses. As

such, giving to a church effectively contributes to its ritual capacity. In the Orthodox division of religious labour, priests are expected to pray for everybody, soliciting divine blessing for the entire community of believers. Accordingly, giving to a church always produces an excess of blessing of a generic, undifferentiated kind, from which people other than the giver—irrespective of their piety and of their relationships to the saint or church—might benefit. By the same token, the giver might partake of this collateral blessing produced by his or her actions. There is, however, no exact calculus for how and when rewards ensuing from this generalized exchange might be exacted, and by whom.

The configuration of servitude and intercession takes a slightly different shape in *silet* where one offers his or her children as a votive gift. The only case I know well of such an offering is that of Shewaye. Three years ago, she was pregnant with twins, and close to the end of her pregnancy, medical exams showed that “one of the children was in a weird position”, as she put it. Fearing a complicated delivery and cesarean section—“being touched by a blade,” in her words—Shewaye appealed to the help of a powerful intercessor and mother in her sleepless nights:

My Lady (*Immebete*; Mary) there is nothing impossible to you. Grant me a peaceful labour, make my children safe. You have the solution to make it happen without a blade... If I give birth peacefully [...] I will get them baptized at your church. I will come to your garden and give them to you.

On the day of *Lideta Mariam* (the birth of Mary), Shewaye’s water broke. A neighbor alerted her husband, who rushed home from work with a taxi in order to take her to the hospital. However, as she recalled, “before I could even get in the car the first child had already come out.” Her neighbors went looking for Tsion, who is a known midwife. Tsion should have already been in church that day, but something caused her to be late. With her assistance, Shewaye delivered the second child quickly and safely. Tsion shouted “*Immebete*” (My Lady) three times, and Shewaye remembered her vows, declaring in exhaustion: “I believe in the intercession of saints” (*be kiddusan amalajinet amenallew*). Neither the fact that the children were born on a Marian day nor that Tsion was late for church were considered mere coincidences, but rather patent signs of saintly intervention in human affairs. Shewaye honored her promise by getting the children baptized in a Marian church forty days later.

The children are both a gift from the saint and a gift to the saint. The identity between saintly gift and human counter-gift has important consequences in bringing about a

desired circularity of exchange with the saint that can be extended beyond the bounded ritual time of the vow. Indeed, the children will be considered “children of a vow” (*ye silet lij*): children who have another mother in Mary whom they should honor for the rest of their lives, cultivating a relationship established on their behalf by their earthly mother. As such, Shewaye effectively gifted to Mary two prospective servants, who will enhance her fame and act as witnesses to her efficacy. Giving children to a saint is also a powerful strategy for establishing a durable relationship between the saint and the entire kin group, which will benefit from saintly protection by virtue of the relationships of spiritual kinship binding the saint to the promised children. Offering children to Mary is, in other words, also a motherly form of “doing for” the entire family. The extensibility of blessing and protection to others, as well as the extensibility of human-saint relationships in time through ritual giving, are key to the dynamics of *zikkir*, the ritual form to which I turn next.

6. *Zikkir*: saints, hospitality, and remembrance

On the day of Abuna Gebre Menfes Kidus, a saint popularly known as Abo, I paid an unannounced visit to my friend Magdalawit, a woman in her thirties living in Piassa. I found her busy distributing food to a number of neighbors and friends crowded into her small house. Each time she offered food, she would whisper gently: “*Sile Abo*” (for the sake of Abo). Each guest kindly bowed replying “Abo ystillin” (Abo will give you on my behalf). “Today I am lucky, I will get blessing from a white man (*farenji*),” she said when I entered, provoking the polite laughter of her guests. As she explained to me, this was her *zikkir*: “It is a way of honoring and remembering the saint. I give you food in his name and you bless me back in his name.” Stricken by pneumonia six years ago, Magdalawit invoked Abo from her sickbed: “Abo, come quick to me. If you heal me, I shall do *zikkir* in your name every year for the rest of my life.” Ever since, on the day of the saint, she maintained and renewed her vow.

Zikkir is commonly formulated as a promise to hold a feast in honor of the saint on his or her yearly or monthly celebration day. Less frequently, *zikkir* might begin as a once-off, successful *silet* which the suppliant decides to extend in time, seizing the occasion to establish a durable relationship with an efficacious saint. All the *zikkir* I have attended are rather informal events. Apart from the formulaic verbal exchanges between host and guests, the markers of ritual space-time are scant. These may

include: guests wishing, upon their departure, that the saint should extend his generosity to the household in the years to come; priests blessing the food and expressing similar wishes when invited; images of the saint exhibited in the house with candles or frankincense lit for them; or fresh grass spread on the floor, as it is during religious festivities.

Unlike *silet*, in *zikkir* the human counter-gift is not directed to churches, but to human guests. Magdalawit had no doubt that Abo was present when people ate in his name: “Whenever you give honor to the saint and remember him, he will be there, because his name is called and exalted.” According to Magdalawit, “This feast is for saint Abo; that’s how I show my love. It’s like saying ‘Abo come into my house’.” My initial understanding of these words led me to construe the saint as a guest of honor invited into the domestic space of his protégé. In ordinary practices of hospitality, honored guests are supposed to eat more and eat before other commensals; but saints never partake in commensal relationships as direct consumers. Abo thus makes for a very strange guest indeed, occupying a spurious role in the feast.

Here, Stephen Feuchtwang’s theory of ritual as a dynamics of host-guest reversal is useful.²² Feuchtwang argues that a distinctive feature of many rituals lies in “the marking out of an inside, which an outside of greater power, authority, and scale is invited to enter into, respond within, and depart from. The entrance is not just a crossing of a threshold, but an entering in the host position” (2010:70). Magdalawit’s invitation to the saint—“Abo come into my house”—is reminiscent of the syntax of hosting. Yet, from the onset of the commemoration, all ritual acts were geared towards the acknowledgment of the saint’s benevolent patronage and his regular dispensation of grace. And supplications were made for future provision. As soon as he was invoked, the saint appeared less as a guest and more as the real, generous host and provider himself. While the food offered was the product of human labour, people offering *zikkir* emphasised that their capacity to do so derived from the support granted by the saint. Their access to the resources necessary to host people was a saintly blessing in itself. In a sense, then, the human host offers what she has received; and she can keep receiving in the future only if she keeps giving—that is, if she keeps faith to her promise. The performative offering of plentiful food can be said to display what

²² I owe this suggestion to Tom Boylston. For an application of the same theory to the production of the Eucharistic sacrament, see Boylston 2012.

a person has received, but also to represent the very thing she wishes to obtain in the years to come as the saint's guest and servant—plenitude. *Zikkir* is thus also an expression of the desire that the saint will keep acting as a generous host. Food offerings here embody the totality of the relationship between saints and persons: its past initiation, present re-enactment, and future projection.

Zikkir is expressly construed as a technology of social remembrance. Here remembrance is not merely a cognitive operation, a “bringing to mind,” but a remembering, a re-constituting of the object of memory—the saint—as present (Boylston Forthcoming). As I noted, a saint is believed to be present wherever his name is invoked and celebrated; and, by partaking in the commensal event, guests are drawn into shared commemoration of the existence and efficacy of the intangible patron. In a more public fashion than *silet*, *zikkir* represents the visible “emblem of a successful exchange between the divine being and the individual” (Pina-Cabral 1986:164). Being invited to a *zikkir* is a sufficient verification of the saint's miraculous intervention in the life of the human host—a story that is often recounted in such gatherings, and that commensals display interest in and comment upon with words of praise. Therefore, as I noted for *silet*, the ritual design of *zikkir* and the work performed by the servant of the saint broadcast the efficacy of the saint's spiritual persona in the human social world, potentially enlarging the number of the saint's clients.

Zikkir, then, is a re-enactment and public renewal of the promise that sealed the bond between saint and host. In its commemoration of the initial vow, *zikkir* also marks a pledge to give thanks on the next day of the saints in the year to come (cf. Feuchtwang 2010:62), which performatively re-constitutes the host as the saint's servant. *Zikkir* solidifies an existing relationship while soliciting further responsiveness from a saint proven to be willing to dispense grace. In these terms, *zikkir* is an endless repetition of a vow, proceeding from supplication to supplication, that terminates only with death; but which, as we shall see, instantiates relationships whose efficacy may transcend the limits of individual mortality.

At the same time, the performance of *zikkir* reaffirms a covenant that goes beyond saint and host. Through the mediation of people like Magdalawit, who host the *zikkir*, the protection of the saint is unfailingly extended to the entire household. In this respect—much like gifting children in *silet*—*zikkir* represents an effective way of

establishing a relationship of spiritual kinship with a saint, incorporating and binding him or her to the domestic unit. Again, we discover a double mediation, understood as a chain of “doing for”: the saint does something for a human supplicant who, in doing something for the saints, does something for her close social others. The formation of such chains of intercession does more than demonstrate the human capacity to multiply blessing through correct action (Pitt-Rivers 2011); it also demonstrates the markedly inclusive character of hierarchical relationships with saints. In the next section, I explore this inclusivity further by examining another form of *zikkir*.

7. Zikkir: saints, beggars, and remembrance

Another common type of *zikkir* consists in distributing food to beggars on days dedicated to given saints. Kidist, a woman in her early forties, honored her covenant with Saint Michael every month by distributing food to the beggars stationed outside the walls of her local church. She has done so for three years, since the time she got a secretarial job at Ethio telecom after long months of unemployment thanks to the intervention of the saint. Every other application she submitted had been rejected, leading her to believe that God was angry with her or that she was the victim of some kind of sorcery. As Kidist recounted, “I did not know what the problem was, but I knew that Michael could fix it and I was desperate... So I made a promise to give bread to beggars in his name in exchange for his help.”

Knowing about my research interests, she asked me to come to her house early in the morning on Michael’s day. Around 6.00 am, she carefully placed a dozen pieces of bread in a woven basket and tied to it a laminated image of Michael, so that people would know in whose honor the *zikkir* was performed. “*Sile Mikael*” (for the sake of Michael), she said while offering bread to the conjoined hands of the first beggar; “*Mikael ystillin*” (Michael will give you on my behalf), the beggar replied— perhaps surprised by the unexpected gift upon waking in the chill daybreak of the capital, or perhaps expecting a regular benefactor. Without pausing too long or adding anything else, she proceeded towards the next beggar till the bread was finished. After the round of alms, she invited me to follow her to the church, where she knelt in front of the icon of the angel. As she said, “I always start my prayers by saying: ‘Michael you are my father and my protector. Keep me for the rest of the month. Bring me the mercy of God even if I am a sinner’.”

Before moving to an analysis of this form of *zikkir*, I want to give some consideration to the religious significance of beggars and almsgiving. Beyond *zikkir*, almsgiving is considered a powerful means of exacting blessing and divine favour. Beggars are particularly fertile “fields of merits” (Laidlaw 2000) and effective mediators of divine blessing for various reasons connected to their greater closeness to God. Beggars’ extreme vulnerability and lack of worldly ties of protection mean that they fall under direct divine protection. As Seyoum put it, “Who will avenge the beggar if harm is done to him? He has nobody. But God will.” Because of their precariousness and destitution, beggars are thought to spend their lives in perpetual prayer, hoping that God will send them somebody generous enough to share with them. Seyoum noted that, “They possess nothing; they live without making calculation. They live only in hope of the grace of God.” As such, beggars exemplify the ideal attitude towards divinity, the realization that man depends fully on God’s will. With reference to early Christian communities, Brown notes that beggars entertained a privileged relationship with a “high God, who was [...] thought to come closest to mankind when the body was at its weakest” (1988:441). Likewise, my informants described the life of beggars as a “perpetual fast” and their flesh as “weak”, consequentially unaffected by the arrogance that manifests in satiated bodies when the flesh is strong and willful (see Chapters 3). Beggars’ stance towards God, as well as their corporeality, are reminiscent of saintly lives; and the fact that saints often manifest themselves in the world of humans under the semblance of beggars is not accidental. As Julian Pitt-Rivers notes for the Andalusian beggar, he “establishes his status by humiliating himself in the admission of indigence and the reciprocity which he concedes in return is on behalf of God” (2012:510). Similarly, my informants considered beggars particularly conducive of divine blessing: beggars cannot give anything back to their benefactors and thus God shall give back to almsgivers on the beggars’ behalf.

Popular knowledge based on the scriptures corroborates this last notion. For Kidist, “Our Lord taught us that if you give to beggars it is like you give to Him. It means that He will give you back good things.” Shewaye remarked that “Jesus said: ‘I will come to you as a beggar and as a guest’. So if you are kind to the beggar, God will be kind to you.” Beggars, as Belaynesh suggested, can also be a test from God: “God sends you the beggar so you give to him [the beggar] and share what God has given to you. If I don’t share with the beggar, God will not share with me. I have to give, even if it’s

five cents. Who sent the beggar? God.” Such views reinstate a vision of blessing as a good that can never be claimed as one’s exclusive possession; blessing is dispensed in order to be redistributed, and each Christian is enjoined to become the moral agent of this process of circulation.

At the level of religious ideology, almsgiving is supposed to be performed with no expectation of reward—a stance that approaches the ideal of the pure gift (cf. Parry 1986). Nevertheless, as we have seen, almsgiving anticipates more or less defined indirect returns—through God or the saints—and unknown beggars become vehicles “towards achieving a desired payback” (Coleman 2006:175; cf. Pitt-Rivers 2012). This expectation is particularly true for the giving of *zikkir*. Indeed, saints will not remain indifferent to the gratitude of beggars expressed in the form of a wish that the saint might give to the almsgiver on their behalf. Saints are even imagined to keep record of such pious actions attesting to the fealty of their servants: “It is less important what you give than under whose name: men forget, the saints do not,” Kiddist remarked.

By giving to beggars, the Orthodox almsgiver enters an economy of blessing and salvation regulated by uncertain rules, stocking up merits, and expecting unpredictable returns in both the imminent and distant future. As Kiddist stressed, these returns may materialize in forms that the giver might not necessarily anticipate:

I might give to a beggar on Abo’s day without expecting anything, but then I can find 100 Birr I had forgotten in a closet or I might get a promotion at work. You understand that this is the work of blessing if you are religious enough. You do *zikkir* because it is a promise and a duty, but good things will come; sometimes it is not what you want, but what God knows is better for you. So keep giving and giving, and you will certainly be given sooner or later in a way you don’t imagine now. But remember the saint is not obliged to give you something.²³

Following Pitt-Rivers, then, it becomes pertinent to ask: “who is helping whom? Is the donor of the alms helping the beggar to stay alive, or is it the recipient [...] offering the donor the opportunity to acquire grace by becoming associated through this act of charity with divinity?” (2011:432). From the Ethiopian Orthodox point of view, both possibilities hold true in a non-mutually exclusive fashion. At the same time, my

²³ When believers do not obtain what they initially request from a saint, they are likely either to keep asking, or to inspect their life in order to understand if the saint has indeed given them something they did not expect. In many such occasions, believers might decide to resort to a different saint if their initial request is unmet. In either case, to my knowledge, the efficacy of a saint is not called into question (cf. Bandak 2013:141).

informants often openly counterbalanced the utilitarian aspects of *zikkir* charity by emphasizing that their ritual giving is not performed exclusively for their own benefit. Indeed, in many cases, the blessing elicited through ritual charity does not impact the giver—or not only he or she—since *zikkir* can be explicitly performed for intimate others. We have seen how the asymmetric patron-client relationship between saints and human petitioners leaves room for the inclusion of human others, and for the extension of positive returns to them. The next two ethnographic examples illustrate more sharply how the “doing for” of *zikkir* can be a form of “doing on behalf” of somebody.

Aberash, a woman in her thirties, feeds beggars to honor Saint Gabriel on behalf of her older sister Senait, who lives in the United States. Senait felt that, if she were to give alms abroad, nobody would bless her back in the saint’s name. By performing the *zikkir* on her sister’s behalf, Aberash felt certain that she could allow Senait to keep the promise she made to Gabriel before marrying an American man and migrating abroad—thus maintaining a productive relationship with the saint for her sister. Aberash was equally convinced that Senait’s two young children, born in a foreign land, would benefit from the protection of a saint honored on Ethiopian soil. As for herself, Aberash speculated that, as the actual giver, she too might receive her share of blessing; but this possibility did not seem to be a critical concern for her. In this case, *zikkir* displays its capacity to extend the rewards of ritual giving to people other than the giver even further—to Aberash’s sister, but also to her sister’s children. More than that, these increasingly common forms of vicarious *zikkir* display the potential of saint-human relations to transcend the dramatic spatial divisions separating diasporic families, creating a global economy of spiritual care that saints—adept as they are at trans-border mediation—can instantiate and sustain.

Bezawit, a woman in her late thirties, kept performing a *zikkir* to Mary that her brother had initiated, and which he made her promise to continue just before he died. By giving alms for the sake of Mary and also for the sake of her brother, Bezawit aimed to ameliorate the unknown status of her brother’s soul in the otherworld. “Wherever my brother is, this will help him,” she conjectured. One day, when she forgot her ritual duties, her brother appeared to her in a dream dressed as a beggar. Disquieted by this vision, she was suddenly reminded of her obligation. Reflecting on the iconography of the dream, she interpreted the destitute condition of her brother as an indication that

more ritual work still needed to be performed for the attainment of his salvation. Beyond exemplifying the dynamics of intercession already noted above, this case illustrates how vicarious forms of ritual giving might extend across the boundaries between the world of the living and the uncharted territory of the otherworld—boundaries that the saints can cross by virtue of their liminal positionality in the Orthodox cosmos with regards to life and death. Bezawit’s story also exemplifies how Christian salvation, often conceived as an individual quest, might instead be a collective business, requiring synchronized, plural labour—a scheduled “doing for” others grounded in ideas of religious merit as sharable (See Introduction and Chapter Two).

8. Conclusion

This chapter has explored interlocking and overlapping forms of intercession as form of “doing for.” Saints lived exceptional lives and died exceptional deaths *for* the sake of all believers. Their ascetic efforts generated liminal forms of corporeality, which indexed their mediatory faculty. This faculty is sealed by a divine covenant granting saints the authority to administer divine mercy and blessing on God’s behalf. Believers solicit God’s intervention “*for* the sake of the saints”, that is, they access divine blessing not simply because of their individual righteousness, but because of the relationships they entertain with saints (who do something *for* them). In turn, the protégé of a given saint may extend the benefits of his or her relationship with the spiritual patron to other people who do not necessarily entertain any special relationship with the saint, thus doing something *for* the people he or she cares for. This doing *for* others, I have illustrated, is simultaneously a doing *for* the saints—through forms of ritual giving that guarantee saints’ social remembrance, broadcast their miraculous efficacy, and enlarge their fame, potentially expanding the number of the saint’s clients.

We have seen that saints perform crucial work of forgiving, of compensating for human sinfulness, and of soliciting divine benevolence—granting a window to salvation by acting as advocates to people whose lives are often marked by an acute sense of moral imperfection. We have also seen how—through various promises, their fulfilment, and their renewal—believers attempt to act on the precariousness and unpredictability of their painful daily circumstances, as well as on the circumstances

of others. Forgiving and promising, as Hannah Arendt notes for Christianity, “depend on plurality, on the presence and acting of others, for no one can forgive himself and no one can feel bound by a promise made only to himself” (1998:237). In this chapter, I have sketched a distinctive Orthodox relational ethics predicated on similar notions of plurality. In the next chapter, I shall explore further aspects of this relational ethics through a close focus on how believers deal with their moral inadequacy by accessing and sharing blessing within networks of spiritual care brought about by synchronized embodied action—specifically, fasting.

CHAPTER III

THE ALIMENTARY FORMS OF RELIGIOUS LIFE: FASTING, BODILINESS, AND THE ETHICS OF THE “AT LEAST”

1. Introduction

Yared and Tamrat often sat on the porch of the Taytu Hotel, the oldest hotel in the country and my home for long periods of fieldwork. Both men were in their mid-twenties, were from smaller cities in the north, and worked as petty traders in Piassa. Slowly sipping their coffee, they scrutinized the flux of international guests passing in and out of the hotel, whispering to each other and exchanging complicit looks. “We are like the border police,” joked Yared. We were in the middle of the longest fast, the *Fassika s’om*, or Easter fasting. Yared was having what looked like a *makkiato*, coffee with milk foam—a survival of the Italian occupation. I jokingly reproached him by pointing out that no animal product is allowed during fasting. Smiling at my pretence of moral rigour, he answered that this was a fasting *makkiato* (*ye s’om makkiato*), with soy instead of animal milk. “By the name of Mary (*Mariamne*), I never touch any milk during fasting. Ask Tamrat,” he replied. Tamrat confirmed with a terse: “Never.”

Fasting, my friends hastened to stress, is central to their lives as Ethiopian Orthodox Christians. Tamrat admitted he was not “fasting fully”; Yared, too, shrugged his shoulders and sighed: “I am a bad Christian for not fasting as well as I should.” In order for fasting to be “complete” (*mulu*) and “perfect” (*fitsum*), they explained, one should fast with all of one’s body parts. Your eyes should not wander towards tempting sights. Your ears should not be open to malignant gossip. Your hands should not steal. Your legs should not take you to places where people engage in sinful activities. Your mouth should be sealed off from insult or backbiting. Finally, as Yared had it, “You have to strain your neck to God” (*wede Egzabiher mangetet allebih*)—a form of bodily orientation that exemplifies rigorous ascetic focus on spiritual matters.

For the two young men, however, the recruitment of the body in its entirety to this ascetic project remained a particularly difficult endeavour in the capital, the worldliest

of all places. Unlike other areas of the country, where butchers closed their shops during the fast in keeping with the ban on meat consumption, in Addis Abeba some butchers showcased especially appetizing cuts of meat—Yared described them as “like fire for the eye of the fasting person.” Such is the nature of the capital, where people of different faiths who are not fasting might tempt you by eating meat in front of you with gusto. In the evening, as my two friends walked past the ubiquitous clubs of Piassa, the loud music they heard evoked dissolute images of the dancing, sweaty, and drunk bodies inside. In the capital women dress immodestly, and one’s eyes are constantly distracted by uncovered, inviting bodies—bodies that are all the more attractive when they have the exotic allure of the whiteness and wealth of foreign tourists. “Do you see these white women? I am fasting now, but I am eating them with my eyes,” said Tamrat. “They are tasty,” added Yared, drawing on the same idiom of sexuality. Another friend who overheard the conversation jested: “You are a *buda*!” *Buda* are much feared blood-sucking witches that consume their victims by gazing at them—icons of asocial, immoral, and inhuman forms of consumption (cf. Reminick 1974; Tubiana 1991). “The women-eating *buda*” (*ye set buda*), replied Yared, giggling with some embarrassment.

Yared contrasted his voracious scrutiny of female tourists’ bodies with the fasting performed by his parents in the countryside, where they spent long hours in the church, slept separately on the floor, and prayed intensively in solitude, far from worldly distractions. “But at least we are fasting!”, Yared exclaimed in a flash of Orthodox pride, switching to English as if he wanted to make sure that I received the message as clearly as possible. Tamrat nodded in emphatic consent while finishing his coffee. The conditionality of the “at least” (*byans*) would keep coming up in my conversations with the two friends as the fast continued. Theirs, as I will elaborate, is an ethic of the “at least” and the “good enough.” Despite their recognition of their disciplinary deficiencies, Yared and Tamrat considered fasting by forgoing specific foods to be the most important aspect of their religiosity. Though imperfect, they knew their fasting would still produce a number of desired results, ranging from the amortization of sins to the strengthening of their relationship with God, and the enhancement of their capacity to benefit from divine blessing.

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In this chapter, I expand my discussion on relational ethics—whose contours I began to trace in Chapter Two—through a description of various engagements between humans and saints. Here I focus on the specific bodily aspects of spiritual relatedness, and the consumption of and abstention from food in particular. In the main, studies of religious discipline have been concerned with practices of self-cultivation performed by individuals and groups whose religious life is characterized by virtuosity, commitment, and zealous activism (e.g. Asad 1993; Hirschkind 2001, 2006; Mahmood 2001, 2005). In the sections that follow, I seek instead to account for the conditions of possibility of ambivalent and incoherent forms of religious discipline in the context of contemporary Addis Ababa. I suggest that in order to grasp the salience of the contradictory, and yet efficacious, fasting practices of people like Yared and Tamrat, we need to attend to Orthodox divisions of religious labour, whereby less disciplined fasting subjects—who perform fasting with varying degrees of intensity and coherence—may still access blessings produced by others within a relational economy of spiritual care. A close analysis of this economy may help us reframe discipline as a consciously shared-out, dispersed project. Specifically, I will illustrate how the flexibility and leniency afforded by the Orthodox system allows for disciplinary projects that, in order to preserve their ritual efficacy, need to be sustained by various relationships with other renouncers. The question that I raise is whether, with its focus on “techniques of the self,” anthropological work on religious discipline might have overlooked the relevance of “techniques of others.” I argue that Orthodox fasting is predicated on a plural, inter-corporeal, and other-oriented ethics, wherein the intricate relationships that a believer entertains with an array of intimate others is central to the production of spiritually productive lives and the fashioning of religiously inflected subjectivities.

2. Moral physiologies of desire and redemption

According to scholars of Ethiopia, no other Christian group fasts as much as Ethiopian Orthodox Christians do (Isaac 1995; Knutsson & Selinus 1970; Levine 1965; Ullendorff 1968). The ordinary believer is supposed to fast for 165 days each year, and for very devout people and the clergy, the total approaches 250 days. During fasting, no meat, eggs, or dairy products are allowed, and people are prohibited from eating any food whatsoever before 3 pm—though some laymen might consume a meal after 12 pm. Technically, sex is not allowed. Every Wednesday and Friday are fasting

days, commemorating Christ's trial and passion respectively. The seven major fasts of the liturgical calendar are connected to Biblical events (Boylston 2012; Isaac 1971). Many lay believers ignore the commemorative references of specific fasts; but such "ignorance" is not considered to hinder the fast's efficacy. For most of my informants, conformity to ritual rules was more important than doctrinal knowledge: it is not theological erudition, but the practical observance of restrictions that produces the multifarious effects of discipline. These effects include forgiveness for one's sins, protection from evils and misfortunes, blessings in all aspects of daily life, and others that I shall detail below. While the meanings and experiences attributed to fasting may vary significantly from person to person, everybody to whom I spoke shared a common set of concerns about what fasting does in relation to the weakest and most religiously problematic part of the person: the flesh (*sigā*).

Statements about the moral status of the flesh are often hyperbolic, underlining its sinful propensities and depicting it as a burden for the soul. One fasts to "kill the flesh" (*sigā lemegeddel*); "the flesh is bad" (*sigā metfo new*); "the flesh is troublesome" (*sigā ascheggari new*). The same negative qualifications apply to "fleshly desire" (*ye sigā fellagot*) or "fleshly thought" (*ye sigā hasab*). Conversely, while seldom the object of explicit discourse, the soul (*nefs*) is conceived as inherently prone to piety and oriented toward the docile fulfilment of divine will. Nevertheless, a closer scrutiny of lay disciplinary practices reveals that the devaluation of carnality is only part of the story: the flesh is both fallen and endowed with the potential of sanctification, matter prone to sin yet also the instrument of salvation if properly disciplined and acted upon. This duality is articulated more explicitly by priests like Qes Ambelu:

The flesh is made of the same matter as the world; it is dust and unto dust it shall return. The flesh is difficult (*kabbad*; also "heavy") and it has worldly desires (*alemawī fellagotoch*). But if you say that it is only evil you don't understand God's creation, for everything the Creator has made is good and we, amongst all creatures, are created in His image. So the flesh is also good. [...] But it is necessary is to keep the flesh under control, so it doesn't lead us to sin.

While lay believers might not go as far as to recognize the inherent goodness of flesh, and while they might not have so clear a notion of humanity as *imago dei*, they do share the priest's view of matter as potentially redeemable (see Hanganu 2010). For them, the paradox of the flesh represents less a speculative problem than a moral challenge to be worked through in everyday life (see Mayblin 2010). As Yared and Tamrat indicated, in ideal terms, this work requires what could be termed an ethical

kinaesthesia (see Hirschkind 2001): a disciplinary regime which recruits the entire body, conditioning its movements, gestures, and the exercise of its senses to spiritual aims. While I shall return to the importance of this notion, I wish to stress here that, in terms of everyday work on the flesh, food intake remained the central preoccupation for the majority of my informants. The flesh might not be religiously problematic in and of itself, but it certainly becomes an obstacle to religious achievement when constantly satiated.

As Birtukan, a woman in her thirties, explained to me: “If you eat and drink all the time, you will always think about the next thing that makes your flesh happy.” Indeed, in local moral physiology (Hirschkind 2001), rather than placating fleshly desires, satiety augments them. Being satiated and consuming meat “makes the body hot” (*gela ymokewal*), increasing sexual desire. Some informants complained that a lack of ascetic rigour is at the root of a surge in cases of adultery (*zimut*). Eating too much and too often is also associated with an increase in aggression and ensuing conflict. In his seminal work on rural Amhara Orthodox Christians, Donald Levine notes: “Contrary to the view that world peace depends chiefly on filling people everywhere with plenty of food and drink, the Amhara outlook would see in such a condition the prelude to mass civil war” (1965:80-81). Levine’s claim represents something of an exaggeration; but my informants pointed out that the eruption of fights among common acquaintances often coincided with feasts and other occasions of intense commensality. Furthermore, satiety as the “comfort of the flesh” (*ye siga michot*) is tightly linked to forgetfulness. As Belaynesh, a woman in her early forties, put it:

When you eat well every day you don’t think about spiritual things. Why? Because your flesh is strong and comfortable; because you think that you have everything you need in this world. Your flesh is happy, so you become selfish. You even begin to say that you don’t need God because you get everything here. [...] When you fast [...] you think about God. For example, when people have problems or get sick they turn to God, but when there is no problem in their lives they forget about our Lord.

Belaynesh’s words echo a shared concern about the illusion of human self-sufficiency brought about by worldly comfort (see Messay 1999:185-212). The Orthodox ascetic repertoire proceeds in the opposite direction, by strategically generating discomfort not just to tame fleshly desires, but also to fabricate a condition of neediness whereby one is reminded of one’s absolute dependency on God. Much like sickness, in Belaynesh’s analogy, fasting disturbs and interrupts the un-reflexive rhythm of daily life, producing a weakened body that remembers the Creator and His

laws. To draw on Charles Hirschkind, here “thinking” and “remembering” have “less to do with the activity of the ratiocinative mind, and more with the way people’s practical engagements embody a” specific understanding of their religious world and their place within it (2001:629).

The Amharic term *tigab* indicates both satiation and fullness as well as disobedience and arrogance. Drawing on this carnal imagery, some of my theologically informed friends described *tigab* as “the arrogance of the flesh that thinks itself as being God,” or “the disobedience of the stomach that wants to become your God.” Counterintuitively, those who eat excessively, having satisfied their needs, are considered likely to refuse to share food with others, and to grow insensitive to others’ predicaments, caught as they are in the centripetal, selfish spiral of *tigab*. The term *hodam*, meaning literally “glutton”, indicates greediness by evoking the image of a single desirous organ: the stomach (*hod*), which overtakes the entire sentient person. By and large, the stomach appears as the moral barometer of the religious subject; while the sensuous gratifications of eating are not uniformly negative, the problem is one of balance and excess—a point to which I shall return shortly.

Indeed, food, more than anything else, constitutes the stuff of socio-moral relationships, indexing and recreating connections between people through various forms of substance-sharing (Carsten 1995). Commensality fosters and substantiates affective bonds of friendship that cannot be considered such if people do not eat together (see Boylston 2013). Many informants displayed a marked uneasiness about the possibility of eating alone: “I consume all my phone credit by asking people if they have eaten and inviting them,” complained Tamrat. Acts of food sharing are the chief mechanics through which care for intimate others, like kin and neighbours, is displayed, and by which durable bonds are produced and reinforced. The relevance of these acts of togetherness is echoed in proverbs I was often reminded of, such as “who eats alone dies alone” (*bechawen yebela, bechawen yemotal*). When one is observed in the act of eating, it is appropriate to invite others with the standardized formula “*inembla*” or “let us eat”—often even if you are inviting strangers. While this practice is largely a matter of etiquette, pervasive anxieties surround the eater looked upon with envy, as the gaze of the other might result in witchcraft attacks known as *ye sew ayn* or “the eye of person”—a reminder that food is by definition something that exists to be shared. Moreover, hierarchical relationships are sustained and acknowledged

through the order of meals, establishing who must eat first and eat more. Finally, one's capacity and willingness to host and feed numerous guests in the excessive commensality of the feast signals and aggrandizes reputation and respectability (Boylston Forthcoming).

And yet, every Orthodox believer is adamant that, without the interruption of the ordinary cycle of commensality by regular fasts, no spiritually productive life could flourish and be sustained. As Tamrat had it, "Fasting is the most important part of our religion because, without it, it is difficult to pray and do other spiritual things. Without fasting there is no Orthodoxy." In a sense, the elementary forms of religious life are alimentary ones.

It is worth stressing that there exists no direct and transparent correspondence between sensuality and sin. Nor does Orthodoxy regard the joys of the senses *per se* as inherently unpleasant to God. The purpose of askesis, according to Messay Kebede, is not the denial of pleasure, but rather the deflation of *tigab* through cycles of deprivation and leniency (1999:201). As will be apparent by now, we are not dealing with an unambiguously neat dualism. As Caroline Bynum noted in her incisive analysis of medieval asceticism, "efforts to discipline and manipulate the body should be interpreted more as elaborated changes rung upon the *possibilities* provided by fleshiness than a flight from physicality" (1987:6). The flesh's very immanent need for material sustenance lends itself to the possibility of carefully manipulating and monitoring worldly desires by asserting control over what comes into the body. Thus isolated in its raw malleability—as Mayblin observes with reference to Catholic Brazil—the flesh becomes "an ideal mediator between two states of being-in-the-world: the fallen and the redeemed" (2010:119). Indeed, as I have argued, fasting bridges the hiatus between transcendent divinity and embodied, fallen humanity by amortizing sin and eliciting blessing (see Introduction). While my informants may not do away with the body-soul split entirely, fasting aims to produce spiritually attuned bodies and souls (Hirschkind 2001:628) by making the flesh the actable instrument of redemption in this world and beyond (see Brown 1988; Bynum 1987; Shaw 1998).

And yet, fasting remains a temporally bounded practice, not a permanent and progressive life commitment. The lay believer's intermittent commitment to disciplines of fasting has its specular counterpart in the figure of the saint. As I have

noted in the previous chapter, many saintly athletes of asceticism reached a quasi-angelic bodily state through progressive, continuous and extreme forms of self-mortification, achieving the total annihilation of flesh, its desires and bonds. As Maud Ellmann writes in her brief commentary on ascetic lives, saints explore the thresholds of corporeality, where “humanity surrenders to a bodiliness so extreme that it coalesces with the bestial and the divine” (1993:13). Indeed, as I noted in Chapter Two, God rewarded different Ethiopian saints with angelic wings, or granted them the capacity to communicate with wild animals. In rural areas, I have come across rumours of contemporary hermits (*bahatawi*) endowed with the capacity to transform into wild animals. Similarly, some monks are said to have fasted so intensely that they became invisible, undergoing “miraculous transfigurations, whereby the immolation” of their physicality was “rewarded by its resurrection” in a spiritual body “fashioned from a medium subtler than flesh” and similar to angelic light (Ellmann 1993:14). However, these extreme cases do not represent a model of successful fasting for the laity. Rather, saints and other quasi-angelic figures stand as examples that are by their very nature unreachable and impossible to emulate (see Bandak & Bille 2013).

Saints, along with priests and monks—who are expected to fast more intensely and respect all the fasting days in order to elicit undifferentiated, collective blessing for the community of believers—all partake in the Orthodox division of religious labour, instantiating a relational economy of spiritual care whereby less disciplined religious persons access the blessings produced by purer and more devout others. It is to these relational aspects of discipline that I shall now turn, foregrounding the lay work of intercession—typically performed by one’s parents—largely neglected in the literature on Ethiopian Orthodoxy.

3. Relational abstentions and the collective quest for blessing

Despite differences in length, meaning, and intensity, all fasts share in a bodily logic modelled on the Eucharist fast (*Kurban s’om*). In order to approach the purest amongst sacraments, the inter-bodily sharing of substance—whether produced by commensality or sexual intercourse—must be suspended at least eighteen hours prior to the Eucharistic meal (see Chapter Four). As Boylston notes, “The purity rules surrounding the Eucharist [...] do not [...] imply a negation of the body vis-à-vis the soul, but an isolation, a closure. It is the connection of bodies to other bodies that is

denied” (2012:15). However, I wish to suggest that the closure brought about by this as well as by other fasts inaugurates new ethical forms of openness and inter-subjective connectedness (see Introduction). While, by fasting, one closes oneself off from certain aspects of relationality, it would be incorrect to read fasting as a form of relational suspension. Fasting effectively instantiates a different mode of relating, de-emphasizing ordinary worldly forms of sharing and intensifying a spiritual relatedness of shared blessing.

Let us begin by noting that fasting does not suspend relationships of commensality; it rather regulates their temporal frame and the type of substances consumed. During fasting times, restaurants and cafes continue to be well-attended, but people eat different food—no meat, eggs, or dairy products—at prescribed times—after 12:00 pm or 3 pm. The difference, as Fitsum, a man in his twenties, elucidated is that:

You continue to eat with your friends but since you eat fasting food (*ye s’om mighib*) you remember that this is a time for God and not for pride and fights. The same in the house: there is more peace. The flesh is weak so you do not want to quarrel. Even if somebody you know insults you, you will leave it to God.

Taming the frequency, substance, and intensity of commensality, fasting inhibits the potential of consumption to spur anti-social feelings, while creating relationships purified of animosity and envy. Moreover, fasts are times during which believers set out to ask forgiveness not just from God, but also from everybody with whom they were in conflict, thus entering the fast without resentments considered antithetic to the discipline’s aims. As Belaynesh, a woman in her forties, put it, “You ask for forgiveness from others but you also have to forgive others, otherwise God will not forgive you.” Of course, this shift towards social harmonization remains an optimistic picture and an idealized model. Yet, my informants insisted that the mismanagement of *tigab* and fleshly desires is not just a problem for the individual, but a one that affects society at large and to which fasting provides an effective—albeit partial—corrective.

By de-intensifying cycles of commensality, fasting does not restrict the scope of relationality; it rather extends it beyond the house and proximate social others. Certainly, fasting affects domestic hospitality, as people receive fewer guests and convivial encounters are more sober than usual. During fasts, weddings and other large commensal gatherings become rarer. But if, in a sense, hospitality is subject to a contraction, in another its reach is extended to the ubiquitous beggars with whom food,

clothes, and other goods are shared with greater moral fervour. For many of my informants, this other-oriented impetus originates in the very flesh of the renouncer. The systematic weakening of one's body through voluntary deprivation often equates to purposively making oneself vulnerable. Such a ritual manipulation of vulnerability, in turn, is expected to render those who fast more sensitive to the poor and the needy around them, recognizing their predicament as a shared human condition. Reflecting on the dangers of *tigab*, Fitsum elaborated:

When you eat too much you forget about others. You become selfish and greedy [...] When you fast... You will remember the purpose of spiritual life and give with love especially to those around you who eat rarely. These are people who fast every day because of poverty, and when you fast you understand this.

Yared remarked that while in charitable forms of giving, hierarchical differences between giver and receiver remain clear, all efforts should be made to minimize them: “We call beggars *yene bite*, which means ‘my own kind’, so as not to humiliate them. But when you fast you understand better that they are really your kind, like you, because we are all sons of God in this troubled world.” By shifting scales and affective trajectories of relationality, fasting underplays hierarchy to foreground an encompassing divine filiation and fellowship. Simultaneously, it contrasts the centripetal forces of *tigab* with the logic that “by consuming less you share more,” as Fitsum succinctly put it.

The empathetic dispositions described do not ensue from processes that are predicated on “ongoing, dialogical [...] accomplishment that depends very much on what others are willing or able to let us understand about them” (Holland and Throop 2008:8). Instead, empathy unfolds silently from a shared, ritually transformed, bodiliness and internal experience, a change—a conversion—of the very inclinations of the flesh from anomic desires to the moral reflexes of charity and compassion. Those people involved in this ethical conditioning described their experience of the suffering other with expressions that attest to the pre-discursive inter-corporeality of empathetic engagement: “you ate my oesophagus” (*anjete belashew*); “I think of you inside me” (*wistun asebehallow*); “I feel you inside me” (*wistun esemahellow*).

Some informants conceived of the honing of their other-oriented sensibilities during Easter as a bodily memorialization of the suffering Christ. While one commemorates Christ's passion through fasting, Orthodox *imitatio Christi* also posits impassable phenomenological limits. As Qes Ambelu explained, “One can never feel the pain

Christ felt,” and claims of excessive communion of feeling with incarnated divinity are tantamount to heresy. An incommensurability between Creator and creature—experiential and otherwise—ought to be neatly maintained. Yet, reflecting on the qualitatively different suffering of Christ in the light of the relatively mild bodily discomfort experienced by lay believers during Easter fasting is a potent reminder of the value of sacrificial love, and makes people more aware of the suffering of others, as well as of their divinely sanctioned duties towards them.

Empathy aside, my informants emphasized a sense of collective movement towards a shared bodily resonance—a flesh of the social, as it were. Hirschkind remarks that the sensibilities that generate specific religious experiences “are not something purely cognitive but are rooted in the experience of the body in its entirety, as a complex of culturally and historically honed sensory modalities” (2006:101). Regulated by overarching stylized aesthetics and the synchronicity of fasting, “people’s sensory responses are similar [...] to the extent that” they “have been shaped within a shared disciplinary context. They possess a specific affective-volitional structure as a result of the practices by which one has been formed as a member of a specific community” (Hirschkind 2001:629). The visceral ethical orientations of fasting substantiate the believer’s sense of belonging to a larger Orthodox community, specifying its contours and marking its boundaries with Muslims—who fast at a different time—and Protestants—whose *ad hoc* fasts do not follow calendric rules. These are, following Michael Lambek (1992), not just imagined boundaries *between* groups and bodies, but boundaries lived out *within* bodies. Thus, as I shall elaborate later, fasting is a valuable means through which persons who live religiously ambivalent lives manage to retain a sense of connection and communion to Orthodox identity, community, and a specific ritual time.

There is another important sense in which the ethics of fasting is primarily other-oriented. Indeed, fasting is not just a work-of-the-self-on-the-self, geared towards the achievement of moral perfection and coherence as an end in itself. Crucially, it is also a “technology of the other”, whereby the spiritual labour performed on the self is meant to exact earthly and otherworldly dividends not just for the renouncer but for his or her kin—and also, more rarely, for neighbours and friends. This intercessory dimension of disciplinary practices is largely absent in the Foucauldian take on discipline and self-fashioning and the anthropological studies it has inspired.

Ethiopian Orthodox parents (and particularly mothers) strongly insist that their ascetic efforts are part of a relational economy of spiritual care where merits, blessing, and divine mercy can and should be shared with family members. This capacity for vicarious piety was often illustrated to me through the saying: “We are here [we survive] because of the prayers of our mothers and our fathers and even grandparents” (*be ennatocchaccin enna abbatocchacin endihum be ayatochacin tselot new yalenew*). In such a view, blessing is an inherited capital that the individual receives through the work of various generations of people.

Belaynesh, who works long hours as a cleaner in a cheap hotel, tried to make a few extra renunciations beyond the minimal ritual requirements of the fast, and took advantage of every gap in her busy schedule to pray:

God help me to bring food on the table every day; help me to keep this job so that they [family members] can live; bring peace between me and my employer; keep my daughter healthy and safe; help her to understand her lesson in school; protect our house from evil.

She conceived of her fasting and prayers as a form of care for her daughter and younger sisters living with her—and perhaps as a way of compensating for her protracted absence from the house. Mothers, more than others, perform a spiritual work similar to that of other intercessors. Specifically, mothers assume a quasi-priestly role through their capacity to capture, reroute, and re-distribute blessing (see Chapter Two). Through the excruciating immolation of their physicality—similarly to saints—they become living sacrifices for the benefits of the entire household. Cooking and feeding are construed as forms of ethical labour capable of objectifying in food the loving expenditure of energy for others. However, by carefully regulating the tempo of food abstinence through their control over meals, mothers perform an equally relevant ethical task by contributing to the purification of the entire household through synchronizing the stomachs of its members (cf. Bynum 1988). Rather than a simple matter of individual self-fashioning, fasting exemplifies Orthodox logics whereby religious subjects are made and remade by the religious labour performed by others for them and on them.

Finally, the scope of the undifferentiated blessing and mercy exacted by fasting is even wider. During a brief encounter with veterans of the war against the Italian occupiers, I was told that victory in battle has been historically dependent on the fasting and prayers of civilians and clergy alike. Elderly informants also remembered how in

periods of drought, entire villages fasted in order to solicit divine blessing in the form of rain. By contrast, current complaints about religious discipline are used to articulate a socio-moral critique of contemporary society by claiming that many economic and political problems are caused by the fact that people do not fast as intensely as they should. Most informants do not just pray for themselves and for their kin, but for the nation as well—regarding their disciplinary acts as valuable contributions to the lives of those with whom they do not enjoy any significant relationship but whom they perceive as members of the same religious and national community. As Wubet, a devout woman in her early sixties, explained:

When I fast I pray to God by saying: “We don’t deserve your grace, but please bring peace to Ethiopia, because we have seen too many wars [...]; make the harvest of the farmers plentiful, so that everybody will have food; bring prosperity to the country, so that the youth will have jobs and will not cause trouble.”

Wubet made clear that different categories of persons fast with varying intensity: that parents are supposed to fast more than children, priests more than laymen, and so forth. This division of disciplinary labour is unproblematic for most people. A few members of reformist movements attempting to inject new rigour into Orthodox practices lamented that far too many people find in this system a justification for their disciplinary laxity. Such critiques notwithstanding, everybody concurs that acting out penitence together during fasting amounts to a concerted production of a penitent world, where blessing is abundant and widely accessible. The point here is not merely to represent biblical events, say Easter, by commemorating them through the rhythms of bodies and rituals; but also to instantiate the potency of the prototype in the here and now of the corrupted world that, for a certain time, is transformed by it. But how do people like my friends Yared and Tamrat inhabit such a world? What is the significance of fasting for their young, undocile bodies, as well as for other individuals who do not feel that they fast as they should? And what do their concerns about the imperfection and incompleteness of their disciplinary projects tell us about Orthodoxy more generally? It is to such questions that I turn in the following sections of this chapter. I suggest that, for many laymen, disciplinary projects are seldom postulated on the pursuit of forms of moral coherence and perfection. Instead, they rely on the delicate negotiation of situational and potentially conflicting desires, obligations, and evaluations, within a flexible system capable of accommodating contingency and ambivalence.

4. Balance and the ethics of the “at least”

Yared and Tamrat described their fasting as incomplete because, during fasting, one should consciously and proactively avoid certain sinful thoughts and desires—as well as avoiding the environments in which these desires are more likely to arise. They readily acknowledged that their desirous scrutiny of women—local and foreign—introduced an element of disturbance and incoherence in their disciplinary projects, and that theoretically this disturbance should be avoided. Fasting with the entire body is an ideal difficult to achieve; but nonetheless, for them, fasting remains absolutely vital, even more important than it is for others. Why is this the case?

Yared and Tamrat explained that if fasting calls for a cognizant shift in thoughts and habits, adherence to minimal external rules of food abstention are efficacious in their own right: by weakening the flesh, carnal desires and one’s vulnerability to worldly temptations decrease. As Yared said: “If I look at women like this now, imagine if I was not fasting.” By granting him at least relative control over his desires, fasting helped Yared to resist actualizing sinful thoughts (*at least* in most cases). In other words, if one should not sin while fasting, there exists also a widespread agreement that one fasts in order not to sin, or to sin less. Describing the cultivated docility of pious Muslim women in Egypt, Saba Mahmood offers a parallel with a pianist, “who submits herself to the, at times painful, regime of disciplinary practice, as well as hierarchical structures of apprenticeship, in order to acquire the ability” to play beautifully (2001:210). This is an image that would appeal to most of my informants in that it captures the difficulties and necessities of discipline. And yet, unlike the committed religious subjects described in Mahmood’s landmark work, Yared’s and Tamrat’s disciplinary efforts were not animated by the ambition to approximate perfection through continuous self-discipline—an ideal that they nevertheless valued. Their “ethics of the *at least*” aimed at the limitation and containment of desires to the extent that they could be limited and contained, rather than their transcendence or eradication. In the Ethiopian Orthodox universe, moral imperfection and ambivalence is a given and self-consciously recognized condition; it needs to be addressed but, *at least* in certain stages of life and for a number of people, it cannot be overcome. Fasting is an ongoing thematisation of imperfection in which, as Yared suggested, if one is unable or unwilling to aim high in ascetic terms, he “can *at least* avoid making his condition worse by becoming slave of his flesh during the fast, which is a time of

holiness.” In this respect, fasting represents a contextual answer to the ethical question of how one ought one to live, as much as to its negative reversal. In this view, discipline is also predicated on an ethics of the “good enough” in that—as I shall illustrate later—fasting fulfils the minimal conditions for maintaining connections to Orthodox identity as well as to the community of Orthodox bodies fasting in synchrony, while not foreclosing access to divine proximity and blessing (see Bandak & Boylston 2014).

Speaking of how fasting influenced his daily activity, Yosef, a man in his early twenties, provided an apt example of ethical forms of situated reasoning and practice enhanced by religious discipline:

Yesterday I was walking home after I talked with Yared till late. I passed by the Tsegereda bar, and I heard Jah Lude’s [a known musician] music. [...] I looked inside and there were some beautiful *chickoch* [Amharic slang plural of the English word “chick”]. One smiled at me at the gate. And I thought, “Maybe some friends [...] are inside... Maybe I should go for a beer, let me rela”. I had drunk one beer before. But then I felt something inside... It was the wrong thing to do. [...] Just like this, by intuition. And I thought about God and that this is how the world tempts you. God and the world, how do you choose? So I went home very quickly. This is how fasting works. If you eat well all the time you don’t have this power to resist temptations.

The exercise of practical judgment—*phronesis* (see Lambek 2010b:19-20)—here is an internal intuition that is nevertheless enabled by adherence to external disciplinary rules and their corporeal efficacy. Unlike in some Protestant ideologies, which foreground sincerity as the condition of ethical action (cf. Keane 2007), here we are confronted with a more complex relation between external rules and inner states. The “inside” of the religious subject is indeed an integral part of what discipline aims to modify through its performative acts. Crucially, in the context of Ethiopian Orthodoxy, these acts often precede inner ethical capacities and feelings, rather than following from them (cf. Lambek 2010c:46).

As Samueli Schielke observed in his study of Ramadan in Egypt, in the disciplinary projects of ordinary believers, not all norms and boundaries are absolute and non-negotiable. Rather they are often “subject to [...] contextual shifts” (2009:28) and different forms of situational evaluation. A similar flexibility is exemplified by Yared and Tamrat’s strategic attempts to avoid some activities considered worldlier than others during times of fasting. For instance, they both temporarily give up chewing *khat* (a mild stimulant plant), which they considered “worse than eating meat.” My friend Essubalew described chewing *khat* as “the devil’s fasting” (*ye saytan s’om*).

Those who chew do not feel the need to eat, and grow thinner and thinner, literally consumed by their addiction. Addiction (*sus*) is construed as the utmost expression of worldly enslavement, and the eclipse of the capacity of judgment that fasting aims to enable²⁴. While giving up chewing *khat*, Yared and Tamirat displayed a more lenient stance towards other activities that are considered conflictual with the aim of fasting, but do not entail substances that are attributed straightforwardly negative connotations in the Orthodox universe. The consumption of alcohol, for example, awakens passions, releases aggression, and undoes the self-restraint that the moral aesthetic of fasting expresses and reinforces. However, in discussing alcohol, Tamrat refocused the evaluation of its dangerousness in the language of balance rather than in terms of outright prohibition: “If you drink a beer, it’s ok, but if you drink too many... You know what we say here, ‘one glass makes you smile, two make you fight’. And then the fasting is broken (*s’om gidifwal*).” In this elastic assessment, alcohol is clearly fraught with risks, but still lends itself to the exertion of a balancing control. *Khat*, by contrast, exemplifies the loss of every form of control and balance: addiction²⁵.

Despite a keen awareness of the incoherence and contradictions inherent to their fasting, Yared and Tamrat do not live in a state of constant moral torment; nor are they prey to an existential angst originating in their incapacity to reconcile their daily life with the grand scheme of things. Rather, despite the indocility of their young bodies, my friends considered fasting as a time when they feel more at peace than they normally would. As Yared had it, during fasting, “The consciousness rests” (*hilina yreffal*). Fasting is a particularly valuable experience in the urban environment, as it contains the promise of escaping the anxieties of excessive worldly entanglement by refocusing attention—even if partially—on the permanent transcendence of the divine, casting contingent concerns in the light of ephemerality. Fasting provides closure to the worries of worldly life, and an opening to the spiritual concerns of one’s relationship with God and with others. In a striking echo of some of my informant’s concerns, Teresa Shaw writes that “Fasting imitates the life in the Garden of Eden not

²⁴ Universally condemned by the church, *khat* is furthermore associated with Islam and with illicit spirit possession cults.

²⁵ Obviously, the assessment of balance is relative to specific individuals. More fixed and non-negotiable standards inform the fasting of different categories of religious subjects, such as monks and the saints.

only in terms of specific dietary rules. It also recalls the early state of innocence and detachment from concerns for acquiring food and maintaining a food supply” (1998:178). While not quite a full removal from the concerns of worldliness, fasting allows one to strike a productive balance between self and world in a context where the Orthodox believer is constantly surrounded by potentially sinful stimuli. That this escape and balance is always partial at best is less a matter of concern to my friends than it is to the anthropologist pestering them with questions inspired by the intellectualist pursuit of rationalizing ambivalence. And, far from being simply a retrospective justification of moral failure, the emphasis that Yared and Tamrat place on ethical equilibrium captures the essential Orthodox notion of balance as fasting’s meta-virtue (see Lambek 2010a:20): an underpinning, organizing principle of excess avoidance that operates on different temporal scales. Indeed, as I shall illustrate below, this principle of balance informs practices and choices within the fasting time; organizes the broader alternation of times of lenient consumption and times of abstention, saturating the yearly calendar with spiritual meaning and efficacy; and extends to considerations about the intersection between discipline and the lifecycle.

5. Balance and the temporalities of discipline

Fasting’s very indeterminacy—the fact that it means different things to different people, and is attributed a vast array of beneficial, even unpredictable, effects—allows certain categories of persons to concentrate on specific aspects of the discipline that best suit their circumstances. Yared and Tamrat, who are consciously aware of their sinfulness—both in times of discipline and beyond—place greater emphasis on the penitential efficacy of fasting. Fasting cleanses the sins of the past—or *at least* some of them—while balancing out those of the present.

Temporary adherence to stricter moral obligations is contingent on the nature of times of fasting; these obligations would not hold the same moral weight in other times of the year. Indeed, Yared and Tamrat look with excited anticipation to the end of every fast, after which eating and drinking copiously will be largely unproblematic, and when they will be able to go dancing and flirt with girls more freely. Fasting shapes experiences and understanding of non-fasting time, as one always knows that there will be another fast soon in which to seek divine forgiveness and amortize sins. In broader terms, the ritual calendar strikes a balance between the relative leniency of

ritually unmarked time and times of atonement. On the one hand, according to Messay (1999), this cyclical alternation coerces *tigab* into an ephemeral mode of existence, preventing it from becoming the defining, continuous, trait of individual and collective life. On the other, as Schielke notes, “it is precisely the temporary rigour” of fasting “that establishes and legitimizes the flexible nature or norms and ethics for the rest of the year” (2009:28). This demarcation of time corresponds to the contraction and dilatation of the hiatus between fallen humanity and perfect divinity: during fasting, God listens more willingly to one’s petitions, divine blessing is more widely accessible, and sins are more easily forgiven than in non-fasting times. Furthermore, the structure of time mirrors the way in which many informants construe the essence of human-divine relationships, built primarily in terms of transgression and forgiveness. To find God (*Egzabiher magegnat*), to paraphrase my informant, is always an act of return; and fasting is the paramount way to regain this lost proximity.

Many informants extend a similar logic of balance to the entire span of life trajectories. Indeed, young people endowed with bodies that are particularly vulnerable to desire and temptation often take a prospective view of the ethics of discipline (cf. Lambek 2010c:43), claiming that they will fast more rigorously when older. Despite the fact that their incoherent discipline is often subject to critique by various members of the Orthodox community, it is widely accepted that discipline intensifies with the progress of the lifecycle. Young people are commonly defined as “explosive” (*fendata*), that is, inherently impulsive, prone to insult and aggression, rebellious to authority, and driven by carnal passions. Elders, on the other hand, by virtue of their closeness to death, are more “fearful of God.” Fear here indexes the right attitude toward a divinity pleased above all by submission—the opposite of *tigab*. Tamrat commented that “Since elders are free from work and other worries they spend more time in church and learn more about spiritual things.” Eyerusalem, a woman in her early thirties, commented that: “Older people have seen a lot in life, seen good and bad, witnessed that earthly life (*mehederawi nuro*) is filled with lies and betrayal. They know about inner peace, and that the only way to get it is through God.” In their reverence for elders as exemplars of moral conduct and vessels of wisdom, my young informants appeared to espouse an ascetic view that devalues worldly pleasures while living deeply enmeshed in worldly entanglements. They expressed their aspiration to “fast like elders” in the

future, while often placidly accepting their limitations in this stage of life. In this perspective, the ethics of discipline is also one of the “not yet.”

Differences in disciplinary intensity contingent upon age, I wish to suggest, are not simply an issue of acquired wisdom, but also pertain to the experience of different kinds of corporeality. Indeed, elders’ progressive retreat from worldly engagements and profane spaces, and their shift towards a contemplative life and churches, is coincidental with their bodily disengagement from the cycles of sexual reproduction and carnal desires. Freed from the burdens of the flesh, older virtuosi become purer channels for the social diffusion of divine grace, which is often conceived as clean force at odds with the sphere of sexuality and its correlates (Bloch & Parry 1982; Christian 1972; cf. Shaw 1998). In an Orthodox continuum of embodied purity, elders’ bodiliness can be considered slightly closer to that desexualized docility of the bodies of monks and saints. It is widely agreed that, given this condition, fasting comes easily for elders. Yet, had everybody reached such a stage, the universal enforcement of disciplinary regimes would lose part of its socio-religious purpose. In a sense, Yared and Tamrat’s adherence to the minimal and non-negotiable requirements of fasting, despite—or indeed because of—the recalcitrant sensual excess of their bodies, exemplifies more graphically the power of the EOC and the spectacle of the unavoidable submission of all things to divine authority.

Different categories of people are subject to different ethical standards of evaluation. A young man who chases women during fasts is condemnable, but excusable because of his age. Were an elder to do the same, contravening the idealized image of his²⁶ category, he would provoke stronger reactions. The expression *keletam shimagle*, which my informants translate as “sugar-daddy” or “an elder who behaves like a teenager,” crystallizes particularly sharp sentiments of moral repulsion towards such behaviour, becoming a negative exemplar. The same expression might be applied to elders particularly prone to drinking and aggression, that is, people who deviate from the expected course of spiritual maturity. With the chronological view that their position affords, few elderly informants suggested that, piety is better evaluated over the span of an entire life. This view entails that in phases of greater maturity, one is granted the possibility to make up for the shortcomings of one’s youth, and to be

²⁶ Note that moral concerns about elders’ desires are mostly directed towards men. The abhorrent idea that an older woman may engage in such immoral activities is much rarer.

evaluated by others not just in light of the past, but with regard to the conformity of one's piety and moral comportment with one's age. As a corollary of this view, largely shared by my young friends, the transgressions of youth acquire pedagogical valence in that they teach—sometime harshly, but perhaps more effectively—what proper ethical lives should look like. Few pious persons come to this realisation naturally, but many arrive at it through more tortuous and troubled paths.

The most zealous segments of Orthodox society would often criticize views entailing contingent and temporally-shifting moral criteria as indicative of an instrumental and “fake” (*forgit*) religiosity. Interestingly, Yared's reply to this line of critique highlighted that moral imperfection is a shared condition and that, in acknowledging his personal liabilities, he was less of a hypocrite than those who claim to live piously. In a quintessentially Orthodox fashion, Yared equated the “holier-than-thou” stance to an act of pride and arrogance (*tigab*), explaining that: “We need fasting because nobody is perfect and we sin all the time, even without knowing. God wants you to say ‘I am a sinner, forgive me’ and to humiliate yourself. He hates arrogance. Fasting is the opposite of it. If you do not humiliate yourself, God will humiliate you.” He attributed such prideful pretension to some members of the clergy, “Who eat and drink as they want and go after women but then tell you that you are a sinner.” However, as Andreas Bandak and Tom Boylston (2014) illustrate, this counter-critique is not so much a radical questioning of clerical offices and their overarching institutional hierarchy, but rather a questioning of their “actualizations seen and heard about in one's vicinity. The lack of moral perfection here drives public sentiment because priests and those in high office are supposed to know better” (ibid.:28). Similar widespread discussion of the worldliness of priests who do not “pray enough for the country” or “pray with half-heart,”—often mobilized to explain current socio-economic problems ensuing from a lack of collective blessing—reinforce the authority of the church while attacking its immanent malfunctioning. Churchly rituals, offices, and sacraments—and their efficacy—are sanctioned by a divine authority that transcends temporal human instantiations: to say that some priests do not perform their roles with sufficient zeal is to assert that if they did, the structure within which they operate would be capable of producing the desired results. What Alan Hoben noted in his ethnography of Amhara peasants in the seventies still holds true today:

[T]he ideals of layman and priest are seen as complementary and necessary to one another. Laymen may criticize their priests for failing to exemplify the priestly and the priests, in turn, may criticize the laymen for failing to support the church, but all are in essential agreement on the importance of their interdependence. (Hoben 1973:52)

This interdependence points to the centrality of a chain of intercession, and other relational mechanics of discipline to which I shall now turn. In the next section, I seek to corroborate my argument that, for most lay people, gaining proximity to God and accessing divine blessing are largely collective affairs, rather than the simply the result of an individual quest for virtuosity and purity.

6. Relations with others, relations with God

In the Orthodox division of religious labour, the ordained clergy act as mediators between the community and God, through their performance of liturgical duties, and by virtue of their higher degree of ritual purity. As I have noted, the clergy's fasting—like the rest of their ritual labour—is performed in the interests of all, bringing about undifferentiated blessing and forgiveness for the “sins of the world.” Furthermore, clerical knowledge of the commemorative meanings of fasting is key to maintaining the correct performance of calendric rituals. Bandak and Boylston (2014) note that the central role of ritual correctness—the “*orthos*” in Orthodoxy—is embedded in “communities of deferral” whereby laymen who lack theological sophistication can feel reassured by the certainty that somebody possesses the right kind of knowledge and know-how.

Although Yared and Tamrat, as well as many others, attributed central importance to the role of the clergy, they considered the fact that their parents were fasting for them as more directly relevant to their daily life. By this assertion, they did not mean that the greater disciplinary rigour of their parents straightforwardly compensated for their moral laxity. They offered instead another important elaboration on the partible and sharable qualities of blessing as quasi-substance, whose benefit can be contagiously extended to others, often irrespective of their piety. In periods of fasting, when “God listens more,” the excruciating renunciations and incessant prayers of parents—and especially mothers—cannot fail to solicit divine protection and mercy for one's children. Yared explained that during each Easter fast, his mother embarks on spiritual retreat (*subahe*), a period of “temporary monkhood,” for the sake of her three children living in the city. She travels to a monastery and sleeps in the churchyard, living only on water and *kolo* (local cereal), and prays during most of the day. As he told me,

nowadays mothers do this even before their children's high school exams. While fasting emphasises aspects of the person as belonging to the wider Orthodox community, the filial bond is not downplayed; rather, by adding a spiritual layer to pre-existing kin relationships, fasting thickens and reinforces them. Elaborations on the efficacy of mothers' prayers make direct reference to doctrinal aspects of hierarchical mediation: specifically, the Covenant of mercy (*kidane meheret*), God's promise to Mary that he shall forgive and bless those who seek her intercession by calling her name or performing pious works in her honour (see Chapter Two). As Yared explained, "For me God's words are unchangeable. I know that he promised the Virgin Mary that he will listen to anybody who begs Him in her name and grant what they ask. So I know that God respects and listens to mothers and their prayers." When I asked my friend Eyerusalem if she thought that her mother fasted also for her, she replied confidently: "I don't think, I know it!"

Diego: What does it mean that she fasts for you?

Eyerusalem: She fasts a lot and in her prayers she tells God to see her sacrifice and not our [her children] carelessness, to count us in her blessing and not to leave us out thinking that we are being negligent. And she asks God to consider our rudeness (*balghenna*) as ignorance and never as arrogance (*tigab*).

Diego: Why is arrogance worse?

Eyerusalem: Because when you are arrogant you are saying "I know what's good for me," when instead you are supposed to say "God knows what's good for me." [...] When something doesn't work for me I tell my mother to pray and, to my surprise, it always turns out to be good. You can say it is coincidence or that it is the answer to her prayer. You choose.

In this relational framework, and given the contingencies of the lives of my young informants, what is significant in terms of discipline is less the conscious and systematic cultivation of pious selves than, as Bandak and Boylston describe it, "a concern that one does not deliberately seal off ways to access and plead with the divine" (2014:32)—in this case by proxy. In the literature on the Ethiopian Orthodoxy, the quasi-priestly role of mothers as mediators of mercy and blessing has been largely overlooked in favour of clerical and saintly intercession. Yet, if we do not follow the intercessory chain to its very end, we lose sight of the most mundane circuits through which blessings circulate. Chains of intercession run across society and cut across the lay-clergy division, blurring the boundaries between the institutional and the domestic. The pervasiveness of such chains leaves a picture in which blessing is truly a collective affair, and in which the Orthodox Church is truly the whole community of believers bound by a complicated tapestry of interdependent spiritual relations.

Paying attention to the less visible ethical labour of mothers—a labour that is by definition discreet, ordinary, even understated in the lack of public declarations of its aims (cf. Mayblin 2013)—provides us with precious insights about what discipline looks like from the viewpoint of laity performing the hard work of intercession for others. Belaynesh too believed that she was not fasting properly, but for different reasons. She was troubled by the impurity of the cheap hotel where she worked, a veritable den of iniquity where people often rented rooms by the hour for dubious purposes, and where she sometimes had to remove used condoms during her cleaning rounds. Likewise, she regretted having such a tight working schedule that she could not attend church during religious holidays, and that she was compelled to work on days consecrated to specific saints that she would otherwise have honoured through rest and prayer. The versatility of fasting as a practice is that, in its most elementary form, it requires nothing if not a non-action—the abstention from food. This versatility allowed Belaynesh to continue performing important spiritual labour for the benefit of her entire family, while deeply absorbed in the demanding tasks that securing a living in the capital imposed on her.

These constraints did not generate anxieties about the discrepancy between the pedestrian rhythms of her life and the order of the Orthodox cosmos. Belaynesh's concerns lay less in a meticulous reflexive assessment of her disciplinary practice or a struggle for coherence (cf. Mahmood 2005) and more with considerations of efficacy. To be sure, whether her fasting would be efficacious was not at issue. She wondered instead to what extent her kin would benefit from her renunciations. Living in the horizon of urgency and necessity of urban poverty, Belaynesh's concerns were chiefly pragmatic, and yet not instrumental: in the Orthodox universe, making the other central to one's disciplinary endeavour *is* the proper form of pious and virtuous living.

Such a form of living cannot be grasped except through the dense web of relations of spiritual care within which it unfolds. In this context, discipline does not grant primacy to the inculcation of moral knowledge, nor to the acquisition of a pious individualized self through painstaking, progressive training. Discipline is rather predicated on the notion of a self already—and always—in relation to intimate others, and on the axiom that one's relations with God can be strengthened through the sacrifice of oneself for the sake of others' well-being.

The capacity of feeling the suffering of the other during fasting is vital even to people whose fast is far from being exemplary. Yared and Tamrat emphasised that during fasting, they felt more prone to giving to those around them, reminded as they were of the reversibility of human fate and of their privileged condition. The heterogeneity of a body that feels the pain of the other, embodying the Christian virtue of charity, while remaining the site of sinful carnal desire is less of a theoretical paradox than an exemplification of the tensions that fasting is meant to balance. What was crucial to Yared and Tamrat is that they sinned together, but sinned well, as it were: they limited their major transgressions, while violating few of the more demanding Orthodox rules. And, together, they gave to destitute others, during a time in which other people are supposed to share more. In so doing, they connected their lives to something bigger than themselves and bigger than their imperfections: a diffused relational modality and a sacred time in which pride, aggression, and envy are limited, and virtuous dispositions enhanced.

For them, the question of how one ought to live also took the shape of how should one act vis-à-vis concrete others—giving, forgiving, sympathizing, avoiding insults, and so forth. The same concern, in a different fashion, is at the base of the disciplinary projects of people like Belaynesh: mothers, intercessors, and carers. The relational spiritual labour performed by deeply entwined social actors highlights ethical concerns that Lambek detects as lacking in Foucault's work—and possibly in recent studies of religious piety—such as virtues of “cohabitation” (broadly conceived), its ensuing relational responsibilities, and those articulations of ethical practice that “respond in the first instance to the call of the other” (Lambek 2010b:25). In this chapter, I have sought to make a step in the direction of placing ethical action and the production of religious subjects in the coordinated existence of religious collectives, underscoring how the “call of the other” constitutes the driving ethical motivation of Orthodox relational networks within which variegated forms of religious living become fecund and sustainable.

7. Conclusion: leniency and the gentle grip of Orthodoxy

“It is Jesus who taught us why we should fast, even if sometimes it is hard and we cannot do it as well as we would like. Jesus said to take his yoke upon us, but that the yoke is easy and that the burden is light,” said Qes Ambelu. His statement readily evokes imaginaries of submission, but also implies that submission and renunciation

contain their own “lightness”: the very possibility of being unburdened by the weight of fleshly sinfulness and desire.

What a productive Christian life looks like is something hard to determine unequivocally. The study of fasting suggests that it is a life informed by specific relationships of fellowship, of doing for, and of being with others. Outside such dense relationality, blessing cannot circulate and be shared along the impalpable chains of intercession (Brown 1988) that Orthodoxy weaves and spins, especially at their lay end points. Fasting orients one towards the other; it makes his or her predicament recognizable, and this recognition is sustained by embodied dispositions and affects. In other words, the conversion of the flesh from selfish to other-oriented, and the awakening of the flesh’s latent potential for empathy, informs the intricate ethical relationships that fasting brings into being and sustains.

The interdictions of fasting—whatever the believer’s degree of adherence to them might be—“do more than signify relationships; they are rather constituent parts of them” (Lambek 1992:250). To paraphrase Lambek, the various affective registers of heightened inter-corporeality that shape the experience of fasting suggest that if the prohibitions of fasting are the objectified rules of Orthodoxy, one could equally say that Orthodoxy is “embodied in the acts and experiences of its members” (ibid.).

On a broader level, the church’s regulation of the bodies, spaces, and time offers:

[A]n encompassing liturgical order that grants legitimacy to particular performative acts engaged within its framework and hence provides a kind of uniformity and consistency, in which individuals are identified with the ethical order—it becomes an embodied part of them and they become an embodied part of it—rather than experience detached externalized engagement with or against it. (Lambek 2013:843; cf. Hirschkind 2006).

Along similar lines, Nancy Munn notes that authority over ritual calendars has to do with the “construction of cultural governance through reaching into the body time of persons and coordinating it with values embedded in the ‘world time’ of a wider constructed universe of power” (1992:109). In many respects—and at least from my informants’ point of view—the bodily governance of the church is as light as the yoke of Christ evoked by Qes Ambelu. The grip of Orthodoxy is a gentle and lenient one. Rules exist and are indeed unchangeable, just like the eternal truths that the church upholds and guards. But pragmatic engagement with ritual rules implicitly asserts the fact that rules cannot be fully or always respected. Similarly, it is largely unproblematic that different people engage in religious discipline with varying degrees

of intensity, selectively emphasizing certain disciplinary aspects as more relevant to their condition, or worthier of effort.

Through the Orthodox division of labour—one that includes laity, clergy, and saints—and diffused networks of spiritual relatedness, less disciplined individuals are offered the possibility to remain firmly grounded in their Orthodox identity and to participate actively and meaningfully in the life of the EOC (which, to a large extent, many informants conflate with the Orthodox community encompassing lay and clerical members). In such a relational frame, rather than systematic conscious attempts to attain spiritual excellence, what is key is keeping open the channels through which blessing circulates and is accessed. It is equally crucial to adhere at least to fasting's very minimal demands—demands that constitute the conditions of possibility for the inclusiveness of the sinner, the imperfect, and the indifferent believer in the Orthodox framework of churchly “loose governance.” The proclivity to inclusion inherent in Orthodoxy's lenient orientation can perhaps be better rendered with the words of Qes Ambelu:

The gates of the church are very wide and never closed to any sinner, provided that he does not reject and defile the authority of the church. The flock is big and the sheep have different character, one is bad and one is good. But we do not want to lose even one sheep, even if it is bad. This is the teaching of the Lord in the Bible. The sinner has to make such a little effort to bow and show that he has the desire to obey and just a tiny seed of repentance in his heart. God has already made a huge effort for all of us. The gate is open.

Echoing Bandak and Boylston (2014), perfection and virtue lie less in the individual *per se* and more in the system encompassing and integrating him or her. The production of ethical lives is thus not primarily a matter of individual differentiation, nor just the effect of individual decisions and pursuits; it rather depends on more or less passionate attempts to retain openness to, and to align oneself with, the synchronized rhythms and workings of a collective, made up by an intricate relational scaffolding that intimately binds various human others and ineffable divinity.

CHAPTER IV

THE FLOW OF BLESSING:

HOLY WATER, BOUNDARIES, AND THE SOCIALITY OF THE SACRED.

1. Introduction

The quiet of the night was broken by the shrill voice of little Shiferraw calling, “Mom!” The two-year-old burst out crying and trembling around 2 am, waking up his young uncle and I, who were sleeping on either side of his tiny bed. Before we knew what was happening, his mother Nardos was leaning over him, holding a candle. We could see his mother’s hands caressing him gently and wiping the tears from his face in the light of a feeble flame. “Sorry,” said Nardos, lightly touching my shoulder and telling me to go back to sleep. She took the child to her room, from where I could hear the soothing cadence of a whispered lullaby: “*Shiroro, shiroro...*” The child woke up again twice that night; the lullaby resumed each time, in a frailer and frailer voice, betraying Nardos’ exhaustion.

In the morning, Nardos apologised profusely: “It was a nightmare (*kijet*). He has nightmares almost every night. I am very worried”. “Do we have any *s’ebel* (holy water) left?” she asked Meron, her teenaged sister. “No, it’s finished,” Meron replied. “Go fetch some from the neighbour,” Nardos ordered drily, with the authority conferred by seniority. Meron sat shyly in a corner and said in a sigh, “I can’t.” Without questioning her, Nardos left and came back with *s’ebel* a few minutes later, having obtained a bottle from her neighbour. “Thank God for a good neighbour. A neighbour like this is gold,” she said. Nardos undressed her son and rubbed some *s’ebel* on his tiny chest, forehead, and eyes. She then forced a few sips down his throat, despite the child’s mild resistance. “Why could Meron not fetch the water?” I asked naively, after Meron had left. Half-embarrassed, Nardos said: “It’s a woman’s thing,” and proceeded silently to attend to her domestic tasks. I did not ask more. Later I learned that by “the woman thing”, Nardos meant that Meron was menstruating, a condition which forbade contact with *s’ebel* or other sacred things.

This chapter looks at anxieties about permeability and practices of containment central to Orthodox experiences of bodiliness and personhood. It attempts to map the ways that pollution, sin, and blessing are understood to travel across bodies and space, and highlights their sensitivities and resistances to different boundaries. Building on my previous discussion of social and corporeal closures and openings (Chapters Two and Three), I argue that concerns about bodily purity and socio-moral conduct are informed by an overarching aesthetics and politics of controlled containment. I suggest that these aesthetics and politics, and the plural ethics of spiritual relating that they enable, become especially clear in the consumption and circulation of sacred substance—specifically, *s'ebel* (holy water).

S'ebel is unique in its partibility, mobility, and shareability; it can move beyond the walls of churches, into and between the houses of families, thereby entering and producing networks of shared blessing. The sharing of edible substances, and the unchecked flow and exchange of biological fluids, generally excludes Orthodox believers from access to the sacred in varying degrees. The temptations of sin one encounters in the streets of the capital, and the sinful flow of words that typifies quarrels and conflicts, also interferes with approaching the sacred. *S'ebel* enables believers to circumvent the strict ritual restrictions applied to bodies, spaces, and other sacred substances (like the Eucharist), and to restore their relationship with the divine.

I take *s'ebel* to be a sort of communion of the impure. By virtue of its material properties and the more lenient ritual restrictions surrounding access to it, *s'ebel* allows for an array of experiences of sacred intimacy beyond strict clerical control—experiences available to a wider number of people who cannot fulfil the demanding purity requirements necessary to approach the Eucharistic sacrament and/or to access sacred sites. In the hands of the laity, *s'ebel* lends itself to countless uses with great versatility—as, for instance, being applied to the body of the frightened Shiferraw—and enters networks of reciprocity that make up a more democratic sociality of blessing than that allowed by Eucharistic consumption. It is within the intricate nets of this sociality that Christian persons are inter-subjectively constituted, and vulnerable lives sustained, through the collective labour of others who fetch, transport, and share sacred substance.

I will argue that *s'ebel* consumption can be understood as an ecstatic technique. First, *s'ebel* consumption in mundane spaces triggers spiritual sensations characteristic of “being in a sacred elsewhere” (i.e. the churches or shrines in which *s'ebel* is usually found). Secondly, *s'ebel* draws people beyond the immanent concerns of quotidian urban hardship, while repositioning them and their concerns in a wider history of interaction between the divine, humanity, and spaces where the sacred empowerment of matter has occurred (that is, where *s'ebel* has been produced). Finally, in contrast to the Eucharist, *s'ebel*'s divisibility, mobility, and versatility allow for religious experiences that draw those who consume *s'ebel* into a broader sociality of the sacred, which binds together human others—from kin to neighbours and friends—and the divine Other.

I shall start my discussion with a description of Orthodox sacred matter, its production, efficacy and place in religious life and cosmology. This description will provide a background against which subsequent discussion of the religious and social significance of sharing *s'ebel*, as well of the restrictions applying to it, will be articulated.

2. Orthodox matter and the flow of blessing

Qes Ambelu once told me: “If you see *s'ebel* it looks like water, if you see a priest he looks like a man” (*s'ebel sayut wuha ymeslal, qes sayut sew ymeslal*). Of course, he did not mean that priests are categorically non-human. Rather, he pointed at the salience of what is invisible to the human eye: the power of God lying beyond the appearance of material forms. Through ordination, a sacred authority is conferred upon priests, which inserts them into a clerical chain that proceeds uninterrupted from Peter. Ordination allows priests to effect miraculous transformations, such as the transubstantiation of Eucharistic bread or the consecration of water. Similarly, *s'ebel* preserves all its physical properties, and yet it becomes an altogether different entity than water after its consecration. Indeed, I was often reprimanded for using the word “water” when referring to a substance containing divine energies. “*S'ebel* has the Holy Spirit in it,” I was told by Seyoum, “you cannot talk of something that carries the blessing of God as an ordinary thing of the world.” While Qes Ambelu emphasized the invisibility of blessing, he also stressed that we know blessing through its visible effects: “You cannot see the blessing and power of God in *s'ebel*, but you see a wound

healing or a possessed person screaming when they are touched by it.” Confronted with my puzzlement, the priest resorted to a common Orthodox metaphor: “Can you see the wind? Can you touch it? And yet you feel it and you know in which direction it blows. The same applies to the Holy Spirit.”

The people I came to know in Ethiopia were largely untroubled by anxieties about how the presence of infinite divine power might manifest in finite matter, or how unchangeable divine energies can be condensed in impermanent material vessels (cf. Bynum 2011:35-36, 219-220). For them, as for other Christians in history, sacred matter is “simultaneously—hence paradoxically—the changeable stuff of not-God and the locus of God revealed” (ibid.:35). God’s powers and energies are not quite God himself, as He is ultimately unknowable; and yet, given His unknowability, the immanent effects of divine power mediated by sacred substance provide some of the most immediate sensorial experience of His mystery. If a paradox exists, it is certainly not one to be engaged in an intellectual fashion, as excessive speculative zeal might even displease God (see Levine 1965:67). Rather, my informants negotiated their proximity with and distance from God through various forms of bodily engagement—of which the consumption of sacred materials is an integral part (see Chapter 3).

S’ebel is endowed with miraculous powers, and the transformation of water into *s’ebel* is itself understood as partaking in the sphere of the miraculous. In the history of Christianity, miracles upset the schemes of theologians in that they constitute instances “where matter, under the direct action of God, ruptures the order of nature God himself has established” (Bynum 2011:219). And yet, my informants understand creation as the exclusive property of the Creator, who might intervene in it however He decides by virtue of His exclusive ownership and mastery (see Messay 1999). From the Orthodox point of view, God’s violation of the order of creation through the miraculous transformation of some of its elements is not a troublesome violation, so much as a reassuring event (cf. Hanganu 2010). It guarantees that, in substances such as *s’ebel*, a mysterious and unpredictable power can become widely accessible; and, as we shall see, this power can be put to a number of redemptive and healing uses. God the unchangeable exists simultaneously with the possibility of material change, and, through it, “can create or impose miraculous survival in the midst of ordinary demise” (Bynum 2011:220). The frequent discovery of new *s’ebel* sources attests to God’s infinite benevolence, His active desire to save His creatures, and the capacity

of His power to erupt unpredictably through the cracks of created matter and the continuum of human history.²⁷

Despite God's unbounded freedom, and the possibility that He could manifest His power through virtually any given element of creation, God appears to have a predilection for specific materials. When asked why water is particularly prone to divine transformation, my informants resorted to a number of associations. Priests would stress that, scripturally, there are a number of references to the close connection between water and the divine. Before the creation of humanity, they noted, "the spirit of God was on the water"; and they understand the baptism of Christ in the Jordan as the chief instance of God's intervention in human history through matter (an event widely celebrated across Ethiopia every year). Water gushed from the pierced side of Christ on the cross, and indeed *s'ebel* is intimately associated with this substantial prototype and is seen as replicating its flow. Laymen subscribed to similar interpretations or, more commonly, traced associations between water and the fertility of the land, proposing an understanding of divine grace anchored to more prosaic concerns. Drought, conversely, is perceived as an indication of divine withdrawal and wrath, resounding across many painful passages of Ethiopian history (see Dessalegn 1991).

In theory, all *s'ebel* is the same, for the Holy Spirit acting in and through it is one. Yet, ritual practice suggests differences in use between *s'ebel* found in different sacred sites and produced through ritual means. *S'ebel* can flow from certain natural springs located in sacred sites known as *s'ebel minch* (holy water source/spring). In this case, the holiness of the substance is the effect of direct divine fiat, an act of sacred power and the inscription of God's mercy in space and time. However, *s'ebel* can also be produced through the ritual transformation of common water by an ordained member of the clergy who will read passages of holy books, recite a prayer over the water, and blow on it three times. The first type of *s'ebel* is considered to be a sort of smart drug, curing all sorts of afflictions ranging from demonic possession to HIV. While ritually produced *s'ebel* serves most of the same purposes, I have never heard of anybody who decided to cure HIV or other lethal infectious disease through this type of sacred

²⁷ A *s'ebel* source is typically discovered through the dream of a priest or a lay person, who is told by a saint that the water found in a certain site has miraculous properties. Such discoveries, as many urban stories attest, sometimes happen by accident—as, for instance, when a construction worker uncovers water streams that heal long-term disease in the course of road works.

substance. *S'ebel* coming from specific sacred sites might be considered more effective than others in the cure of specific sicknesses, or in dealing with various problems. Beyond its therapeutic uses—on which most of the literature on *s'ebel* has focused (Hermann 2009; 2010; Mercier 1997)—*s'ebel* lends itself to countless applications: it is drunk to enhance the efficacy of prayer; used to bless houses; employed in baptism and other sacraments; applied to the body of children troubled by nightmares like little Shiferraw, and so forth.

S'ebel is strongly associated with the sacred site or the church it comes from. Both places are separated explicitly from the realm of the “worldly”; they are oases of the “spiritual” in the corrupted and fallen geography of the city and its surroundings (cf. Christian 1972:163-164). While sacred sites containing *s'ebel* springs are “transformed” by inscrutable, divine intervention, the sacralisation of churches entails conscious, coordinated human ritual labour. Churches are consecrated through the installation of a *tabot* in their *sancta sanctorum* and the blessing of a bishop. Their consecration produces both an inscription and circumscription of divine power. God is everywhere in spirit, but is felt as more intensely present, active, and perceivable in sacred spaces. While the ritual acts of consecration inflect a different trajectory of holiness to matter and space, the cumulative performance of rituals held in churches over time is said to add to the sacredness of the place. Echoing a widespread theory of sacred contagion, Fitsum said: “Here [in the church] God’s name is called every day. Priests say mass and prepare the Eucharist. People come with their anxiety and ask God forgiveness and mercy. It means that God’s blessing comes down and stays here. It rests on the place, even on the ground.” Churches, with the array of sacred materials and objects contained within their walls, are thus assemblages of high sacred density. Partaking of *s'ebel*, I shall suggest, is to partake of the potency of such sacred spaces and the history of their relationship with the divine.

Churches, as we have seen, are protected from the intrusion of impure human substances by a number of restrictions. By the same token, the flux of sacred materials from churches into mundane spaces is also subjected to the careful control of the clergy. Churches are containers of the sacred, regulating a two-way transmission. The Eucharist is a case in point. The sacrament cannot be taken outside churches, except in rare cases, such as for its administration to a dying believer. Communicants must conform to various ritual conditions strictly enforced by the clergy if they wish to

access the sacrament: they must have confessed, and have pure thoughts and desires; they must have abstained from sex and food for eighteen hours prior to intake; they cannot have open wounds or a running nose; they cannot be menstruating women or new mothers (who cannot even enter the church). The vast majority of my informants considered themselves too impure to partake of the Eucharist, and most communicants I know are elders or pre-pubescent individuals—categories of people considered as purer in body and intention by virtue of their disentanglement from the cycle of human reproduction and the lures of sexuality (cf. Bloch & Parry 1982).

Though *s'ebel* is subjected to many similar restrictions, it remains a more widely and easily accessible sacred medium. Consuming the Eucharist while harbouring a grudge or entertaining impure thoughts might poison the communicant, or “multiply his sin in front of God by a hundred,” as Seyoum explained. The consumption of *s'ebel* does not require confession or purity of thought; and, indeed, *s'ebel* can be used to attain such purity by virtue of its capacity to tame carnal passion. Nor does *s'ebel* consumption entail the severe consequences attributed to the improper treatment of substances like the Eucharist. Menstruating women and new mothers are considered ritually impure and, thus, are not supposed to touch or drink *s'ebel*; but *s'ebel* can be used to bless their houses, or objects surrounding them. Unlike the extreme forms of bodily containment required by Eucharistic consumption, *s'ebel* can be applied to open wounds, and minor leakages—like a running nose—do not prevent contact with it. And, given its portability, *s'ebel* can be accessed not just by the impure individual, but also by people who are unable to collect the sacred substance for any other reason but can recruit others to fetch *s'ebel* at its source. By and large, as I illustrate in the following sections, rules surrounding *s'ebel* allow for a greater degree of flexibility and contextual interpretation, as opposed to the absolute proscriptions applying to the Eucharist. *S'ebel*, I suggest, is the communion of the impure—a material instantiation of blessing available, in one way or another, to the majority of believers.

To sum up, by virtue of its material propensities, and the different ritual protocols applying to it, the blessing embedded in *s'ebel* travels more easily across spatial boundaries, and lends itself to more democratic, shared, and mundane forms of diffusion and circulation. In the next section I turn to a more detailed discussion of bodily flows and forms of corporeality marked by a critical openness that preclude

access to sacred spaces and substances; and, I begin to illustrate how *s'ebel* might allow impure and open bodies to retain contact with the sacred.

3. Bodily flows and sacred boundaries

Ethiopian Orthodox Christians are peculiar among contemporary Christians for their adherence to an array of rules of purity detailed in Leviticus (Ullendorff 1968). Such interdictions shape engagement with the sacred in profound ways, regulating bodily movement as well as access to holy things and places. As in early Christian communities described by Peter Brown, the strict regulations surrounding the sacred “position [...] human beings as creatures perched between nature and the city”; and purity rules serve to protect “sacred space from the formless, purely biological, products of the body that periodically reminded the faithful of their indissoluble connection with the natural world” (1988:443-444) and their fallen condition. In this section, I highlight the incompatibility of bodily flows with the flow of blessing as manifested in its material instantiations (like *s'ebel*). I will describe the social and religious import of this incompatibility, and trace some of the ways in which believers engage with, and partially circumvent purity rules applying to both bodies and space.

Menstruation and the flow of blood

Menstruation excludes bleeding bodies from access to churches and sacred substances on a monthly basis. The polluting quality of menstrual blood is explained with reference to the curse of Eve: “This was God’s punishment to us [women], and we cannot offend God by bringing the sign of the punishment in front of Him, in the church which is His house,” Belaynesh, a woman in her early forties, explained. By contrast, the blood of Christ, ritually reproduced in churches through Eucharistic rituals, constitutes the clean seal of the salvific covenant between divinity and humanity. These two essentially different types of substance should not mix in the same space, or in the same human body. Similarly, not only should menstruating women abstain from drinking *s'ebel*, they should avoid even touching the *s'ebel* container.

Menstrual blood is polluting for all those who come in contact with it, as its pollution travels across bodies through simple contact. The sexual partner of a menstruating woman is obviously more exposed to contagion, and sexual intercourse during this

period is considered both repulsive and a serious sin. According to priests, every man who comes into contact with menstrual blood should avoid access to sacred spaces and substances for a certain period thereafter, decided by his “soul father”—a priest or a monk who acts as his spiritual advisor. Menstruation, furthermore, provokes shame and revulsion, especially among men, when publically visible (cf. Masquelier 2011) or openly discussed in its bloodiest details. The Amharic term for menstruation, *ye wer abeba*—“the monthly flower”—euphemizes the perceived dirt of biological discharge by evoking association with fertility and the clean aesthetic of blooming. My female informants took great care to conceal the most perceptible aspects of their period, and sanitary pads were disposed of with utmost discreteness—preferably outside the house, so as to hide the sign of bodily impurity and prevent others from coming into contact with it.

Though the narrative of the fall has painful implications for humanity at large, my female informants were keenly aware that the “burden of the flesh” (Shaw 1998) was heavier on them. As John and Jean Comaroff note, “because they are held to be uncontained, women are often constrained in their actions upon the external environment. It is as if they threaten to ‘spill over’ into social space, breaching its order—in particular, the basic distinction between inside and outside, person and world” (1992:74). My female informants emphasized that a menstruating woman who breached ritual restrictions surrounding access to sacred spaces and substances would invariably bring direct divine punishment upon herself. In the context of Orthodoxy—much as Mary Douglas has argued—contagion is often a two way process, in that purity restrictions “protect divinity from profanation” and “the profane from the dangerous intrusion of divinity” (2002:9).

When asked about the problematic relationship between female corporeality and blessing, Tsion, an elderly woman, clarified:

My son, these bodies called women and mother... Poor women. They have to endure a lot in this world. You cannot touch *s'ebel* or even its container in those days [during menstruation] and you can't go to church when you are not clean. So you have to be patient and pray even more. You cannot wait to be clean to pray.

Tsion stressed that the embodied limitations of her gender do not sever relationships with the divine. Due to the impossibility of entering sacred spaces and touching sacred things, prayer and fasting become all the more necessary. Moreover, in spatial terms—similarly to what Anita Hannig (2013) suggests in her ethnography of northern

Ethiopian communities—when women cannot enter churches, they can at least try to get as close as possible: by listening to the mass broadcasted by loudspeaker from outside the church walls, and by replicating all the gestures—bowing, signing themselves, genuflecting—of the purer bodies allowed inside. This kinaesthetic piety provides a source of connection to a sacred power placed beyond boundaries that cannot be crossed; it allows a degree of embodied participation in the rhythms of ritual, in synchrony with the wider Orthodox community. Despite their temporary impurity, menstruating bodies gesture and stretch towards the divine.

Menstruating women often ask a purer kinsperson or neighbour to fetch *s'ebel* for them, thus exploiting the convenient mobility of this sacred substance. In an echo of the brief impasse presented in the opening vignette, Belaynesh, a woman in her forties, explained:

You can ask somebody to bring *s'ebel* to your house so that the house can be blessed. If your house is blessed sometimes you feel better. Even if you cannot touch *s'ebel*, you know that the blessing is around you. Or, if your child is sick, then you send somebody to fetch *s'ebel* and she will give it to the child.

As I illustrate below, a similar set of concerns surrounding containment are particularly manifest in discourses about the violent opening of the body during childbirth, and the pragmatic measures aimed at taming its ensuing pollution—which, again, include the use of *s'ebel*.

The blood of childbirth and the water of baptism

A new mother is considered impure for forty days if the child is male, and eighty if female. During that time, she is forbidden access to churches as well as contact with anything sacred. She will be restored to pre-partum purity only after the baptism of her child. Many women I knew in Addis Ababa would undergo a period of ritual seclusion, and avoid leaving the house for ten to fifteen days. During this time, they ate replenishing, dry, and strong food that helped them to recover from the exhaustion of birth, as well as to re-compose a body that has undergone severe dislocation. As Tsion put it, speaking with the confidence of an experienced traditional midwife, “The hole is wrenched open for days. You need to rest and it takes time to close.” Belaynesh recalled the birth of her only child: “My spine could not hold my flesh together [...] my blood was weak and flowing out for long time.” In this experience of fatigue and bodily disarticulation, the Virgin Mary is a precious ally: she acts as a midwife during

birth and mercifully attends to the physical pain of the new mother, assisting to re-seal her critical openness (see Chapter Two).

The contagious pollution of the mother is transmitted to her house, which is known as *aras bet*²⁸ or “the house of the new mother” till the day of the child’s baptism. During a period of ritual seclusion, the mother should eat only from her own plate and refrain from touching various culinary utensils, lest these become vehicles of contagion. The flux of bodies entering this space is also carefully regulated. Some of my informants maintained that visitors might contract the pollution of childbirth fluids simply by entering the house. Mansfield Parkyns relates that in nineteenth century Ethiopia, “The room, and everything in it is considered so utterly unclean, both at the moment of birth and afterwards till properly purified, that men who should enter would be refused admittance to church for forty days” (1853:34-25). However, many of my informants considered visiting the house to be free of negative implications after it had been blessed with *s’ebel* by a priest—generally a week or so after the birth. In this case, *s’ebel* is key to neutralizing birth’s pollution and its contagiousness.

During the liminal phase between birth and baptism, mother and child are particularly vulnerable to demons, which are attracted to bodies compromised in their wholeness (cf. Hannig 2014:299) as well as to the taste of blood and dirty bodily fluids (cf. Popenoe 2004:65). Apotropaic talismans might be hung next to the beds of mother and child, and a knife, meant to defend against demonic attacks, kept under the mother’s pillow.

The liminality of the *aras bet* is reflected in the infra-social status of the infant who, prior to baptism, cannot be considered as a Christian person—and is, at times, referred to as a “Muslim”, an epithet that can be extended to the mother on rare occasions (see Hannig 2013). When I asked about the logic behind this labelling, Belaynesh pointed out that the child “has no religion” or that “he is not yet the son of our Lord.” In the period between birth and baptism, mothers are not only prevented from touching anything sacred or entering any sacred space, but they also temporarily suspend their fasts. Contrary to what has been argued for other parts of Ethiopia, in my field-site,

²⁸ The term *aras bet* extends semantically to a period of ritual seclusion that mothers are supposed to observe till the day of baptism. Note, however, that for many city dwellers, this time of ritual seclusion might be significantly shorter than the customary forty or eighty days. Typically, women would feel confident to leave their habitation seven or ten days after birth and after a priest has blessed the house.

calling the child or his mother “Muslim” never entails that they “do not behave as ‘proper’ Christians during seclusion,” nor that they are “slipping outside the margins of Orthodox Christianity” (Hannig 2014:206). First, even if new mothers do not respect the fasts in the period preceding the child’s baptism, the authority they obey in suspending their ascetic practices is exactly the same that enforces the fasting schedule: the church. As Qes Ambelu clarified, “The EOC exempts women from fasting because they have to recover and their blood is weak. They need strong food because during birth they lost blood. So even if they skip a fast they are not committing a sin, because they have the permission of God (*ye Egzabiher fekad*).” Secondly, in avoiding sacred spaces and substances, new mothers behave precisely like a proper Christian is supposed to do given the state of her open, leaking body. In a sense, the morality of practice is contingent upon the kind of body one is endowed with at a given time (cf. Tsintjilonis 1997).

Baptism is performed after forty days for male children and eighty for females. It is at once a rite of passage and one of reintegration. The child is exposed to the four cardinal points of the compass by a priest or a deacon. The officiating priest, together with a godparent²⁹ of the same sex of the child, renounces Satan and his works on behalf of the child undergoing baptism. The child is taken from east to west—east being associated with the realm of the demonic—and declared in need of freeing from any unclean spirits that s/he might have contracted during the impure process of birth. The purification is sealed by a triple immersion in the baptismal font—a ritual act symbolizing both the trinity and the death and resurrection of Christ. The *s’ebel* contained in the baptismal font is water returned to its pristine, prelapsarian purity, renewed and pure created matter that mirrors the child’s birth into a new life released from original sin.

If baptism is a second birth, it is also a form of death: the death and burial of the perishable unchristian body, and the acquisition of a new one worthy of salvation and eternal life. Parts of the child’s body are anointed with holy oil, and the body in its entirety is solemnly declared a possession and instrument of God. The child receives a necklace with a cross (*metab*) consisting of three threads blessed in *s’ebel*, each

²⁹ Godparents are commonly recruited amongst kin, family friends, and neighbours. However, a saint of the same sex of the child can act as the godparent if the family wishes to reinforce a relationship of devotion to him or her.

symbolizing a person of the Trinity. The necklace should never be cut; indeed, “cutting the *metab*” is a common metaphor for conversion. Priests confer to the child a “baptismal name” (*ye kristenna sim*) that it is not commonly used in mundane settings, but is crucial to the performance of rituals such as church weddings or funerary prayers. The biological mother, as well as other people attending the ritual, are also sprayed with *s’ebel*. Crucially, this blessing restores the mother to full purity, and she can now legitimately partake of any sacred substance or enter any sacred site.

While a systematic analysis of ritual symbolism exceeds the scope of this chapter, I wish to reflect briefly on some of the broader implications of baptismal rituals. Let me return to the question of why the unbaptized child would be referred to as a “Muslim.” I want to suggest is that this description has a lot to do with bodiliness and churchly authority. Following Maurice Bloch and Scott Guggenheim (1981), I propose that defining the child as the ultimate non-Christian is part of a process geared towards the ideological construction of the church, and the divine authority it represents, as the only creative force capable of bringing full Christian persons into being.

Children are born by the sin of Adam and, in order to become “children of God” (*ye Egzabiher lijoch*), they need to be born again through ritual ablution and non-biological parents: “baptism is a second birth negating the earlier one” (Bloch & Guggenheim 1981:378). Ideas and rituals concerning birth devalue human fertility, emphasizing its necessary incompleteness by contrasting it with full divine generative potency:

Baptism is a ritual denying woman’s ability to produce socially acceptable children. At the same time as the ideology stresses the biological ability to produce children, it instantaneously declares the children to be incomplete and declares true and creative power to lie elsewhere. (Bloch & Guggenheim 1981:380).

For this process to be complete, and for generative creativity to be located beyond humanity, a new non-biological parent must be substituted for those who generated the child in sin. But rather than exerting a creative agency of his or her own, the godparent remains a symbolic mediator of divine power (ibid.:384). In short, “The denial of parenthood becomes the basis of an ideological insertion not so much of the godparents themselves, but of that which makes them God parents” (ibid.): divine power, whose only legitimate mediator in this world is the EOC. The ritual grammar of baptism suggests that divine filiation is an entirely clean process which, unlike biological birth, is devoid of any exchange and flow of bodily substances associated

with pollution and divine curse. In this view, defining the child as a Muslim prior to baptism is a devaluation of human creative power and the assertions that such power belongs to the God and the church alone.

Sex and eating

Sex is a necessity, and necessity meant to be enjoyed, as long as it is regulated by Orthodox ethics. “For the lawfully married,” Qes Ambelu explained, “the bed is pure (*alga netshu new*).” Within these limits, sexual pleasure is not considered to be something inherently unpleasant to God (see Messay 1999:190-198). Nevertheless, the exchange of sexual fluids retains polluting potential, and intercourse represents another figure of bodily opening and intermingling at odds with access to the sacred—which, as we have seen, is regulated by tactics of sealing and suspending circuits of shared substance (see Introduction and Chapter Three). As I have mentioned, sexual abstinence is a prerequisite for Eucharistic intake. And, for most lay people, the same restriction applies to *s’ebel*—though, as I will illustrate, in case of emergency most of my informants would not consider it inappropriate to bypass this rule.

I have already highlighted the link between eating and sexuality in Chapter Three. Here I wish simply to recall that abstaining from food is a precondition for the consumption of both the Eucharist and *s’ebel*. Explanations for this requirement vary significantly. For most informants, salvific substance and semi-digested worldly food should not mix within the same corporeal frame. Some priests stress that sacred consumption necessitates a carefully prepared body, sealed to the world and consecrated only to God, a worthy vessel of His superior, clean power. Though there is significant variation in personal attitudes, most people I talked to would avoid drinking *s’ebel* after having eaten, but found applying *s’ebel* on parts of one’s body after a meal unproblematic.

In the next section, I illustrate the continuity of these apprehensions surrounding bodily permeability and containment with concerns informing proper social conduct and ethical behaviour. Openness to the temptations ubiquitous in the urban environment and the incapacity to contain words leading to quarrels are religiously problematic in their own right. But, as I show, *s’ebel* is a powerful means through which the dangers of socio-moral permeability and lack of containment can be addressed and countered.

4. Permeable personhood and socio-moral containment

As I noted, anxieties with permeability and controlled containment are not restricted to bodily flows. They resurface in conceptions of proper socio-moral conduct at large—including acts, desires, words, and affects. In this section, I illustrate how the transgression of boundaries between person and person—such as in quarrelling—as well excessive permeability to the world and its sinful sense-scape (e.g. being tempted by sinful sights) might critically affect access to the Eucharist. *S'ebel* consumption, however, remains largely unaffected by the perils of such boundary-crossing, and might even constitute a remedy to them.

Permeability and the contagiousness of sin

My friend Fitsum appointed himself to the role of my guide in the lesser-known streets of Piassa. An attentive observer of the urban landscape, the young man once told me that, “The problem with the city today is that you see far too many things.” Like other informants, he contrasted the sensory overdose of the city with the stillness and sobriety of the countryside (see Chapter Three). As I have suggested in the previous chapter, the danger of vision lies in a specific predatory quality of the eye, a perilous voracity of the consuming gaze. The paradox of the gaze, however, is that the person who visually prelates worldly objects of desire might end up dominated by them. In other words, there is an ambiguity about the directionality of the predatory dynamic: the flesh desires things of the world, but the world impinges upon the desiring flesh in a way that threatens to undo the very distinction between the self and the world. It is this distinction that, as we have seen, fasting and an array of ritual restrictions seek to reinforce. As Fitsum explained, coming back from one of our long walks:

Did you see? I have counted at least forty prostitutes from Arat Kilo [a neighbourhood of Addis Ababa] to here. It is difficult to focus on God when you see this sort of thing every day. Imagine that sometime you set to go to church in the middle of the night for an important ceremony and you walk amidst prostitutes, drunkards and brothels. You are going to a spiritual place, maybe you want to take communion. [...] Maybe if I was a saint, I would not look at women. But there are times when I look. When I look my thoughts go in all directions, and I am not focused anymore. I don't think pure thoughts... About God and my purpose [going to church]. And these thoughts come to me; I can't control them. This is how the world tests you.

For Fitsum, having certain thoughts and desires excludes him from access to communion (unless one confesses one day prior to taking the Eucharist). Fitsum's worries bespeak a dangerous moral permeability between the self and the world,

suggesting that temptation has an environmental dimension, as does its natural correlate: sin.³⁰ Echoing claims that we have encountered in the Introduction, Fitsum held a vision of sin as something that behaves in a manner similar to contagious substances: it inheres to some places more than others—as for instance in brothels—where people are more likely to become sinners as sin travels across crowds and porous moral persons. “It is in the Bible,” Fitsum said, “if you spend time with the monk you become wiser, but if you live amidst people who do evil things you will become evil.” More than that, just as the regular performance of sacred rituals adds to the sanctity sedimented in churches, the constant reiteration of sinful activity unfolding in circumscribed spaces attaches and congeals sinfulness to them. *S’ebel* is often used to purify such “corrupted places” (*irkus bota*) before they are put to a different use—as my friend Girma demonstrated, when he bought a former brothel to repurpose as a restaurant and blessed it with copious *s’ebel*.

Gebre Mariam, the rather authoritarian father of two adolescent boys, explained that similar fears underpin parental disciplinary regimes. Like many parents, he was preoccupied with the contagiousness of sin. However, Gebre Mariam initially articulated the problem in terms of habits and vices: “By going to a corrupted place (*irkus bota*) your child gets the behaviour of that place (*ye bota bahir*).” He summed up his concerns about the sedimentation of undesirable moral traits in a child through the popular dictum, “A cat doesn’t forget its vice even after it becomes a nun” (*dimmit melkusa ameluan atrissa*). He then pointed out: “From bad habits to sin the road is short.” Thus, being and becoming a proper Orthodox person also implies a careful regulation of one’s engagement with places, people and the “stuff of sin”—the most common examples being *khat* and alcohol. But regardless of one’s state of mind, bad company, sinfulness, and degree of worldly entanglement, believers are still allowed to consume *s’ebel*. In fact, taking *s’ebel* is advised to people who entertain morally ambiguous lives, as *s’ebel* is endowed with the power to re-orient them towards God by attuning their thoughts, wants, and bodies to Orthodox aims.³¹

³⁰ Note that, for most people, the distinction between “temptation” (*fetana*) and “sin” (*hatiat*) is not always clear-cut and that, in many cases, leaving room even to contemplate temptation is already a sin.

³¹ However, the most heinous sins—such as, say, murder—are often considered incompatible with *s’ebel* consumption, if it is not preceded by a contrite confession and lengthy penance.

Quarrelling and the lack of verbal containment

Ubiquitous apprehension about quarrelling among Ethiopian Orthodox believers highlights the danger of the uncontained flow of words. Quarrelling is unanimously considered as a decidedly worldly activity, one of the most common sins, and—as we saw in the Introduction—can even be considered something demonic.³² And yet, quarrelling is also perceived as somewhat inevitable, even integral to “Ethiopian culture”, and typical of the fallen condition. Beyond abstract considerations about cultural and ontological predispositions, most of my informants read the constant eruption of quarrels as the effect of living in a crowded city, where everybody rubs shoulder with everybody else, generating a socially disruptive friction at odds with Orthodox moral ideals of self-control and social harmony.

While readiness to respond to provocation and insults—even with violence—is popularly valued as a sign of bravery, the EOC contends that refusal to engage in aggressive exchanges is the only way to disentangle oneself from worldly enslavement. Indifference to insults is a quality associated with the “big person” (*tillik sew*)—an expression that, in this context, refers to people of greater piety, and elders of both gender who are supposed to be slow to anger and immune to the unruly passions of youth. As I noted in the previous chapter, Ethiopian youth—commonly referred to as “explosive” (*fendata*)—are reputedly unstable, prone to aggression, and acutely vulnerable to violent compulsion by definition (cf. Graber 2007:39). Here, I want to emphasize that believers take the sin of quarrelling to be more serious when insults are addressed to hierarchically superior individuals. Broadly speaking, the marker of hierarchy is not just that one should obey superiors, but that one should not question them: hierarchical relations are also defined by silence and the control of one’s mouth and the flow of words coming from it (see Chapter Five).

Ideally, authoritative figures should be addressed with deferential terms such as “my shield” (*gashe*), “my lord” (*getaye*), “lordship” (*getoch*), “my lady” (*immebete*) or

³² The Ethiopian saying “quarrels come from the devil,” which we encountered in the Introduction, highlights a marked concern with the potential for quarrels to upset religious views of moral relatedness—but also to generate all sorts of sins connected to pride, aggression and insubordination, which are antithetical to the paramount values of submission to God and docile acceptance of His rules. As Qes Ambelu said, “You start quarrelling with your neighbour and, because of a small thing, you lose control and you forget about God’s rule, so you might kill or do something terrible to others. You gave more importance to your anger than to what God wants from you: forgetting God is a sin.”

with the common “father” (*abbat*) or “mother” (*ennat*). Etiquette requires that one should remove his hat when addressing such people, speak gently and parsimoniously, and try to divert one’s gaze from his or her face. As I could observe during my visits to a prominent entrepreneur, upon entering his house, a person of inferior status would bow deeply, sometimes attempt to kiss the knees of the superior, sit only after the superior had seated himself, cross his legs and arms, and answer only when interrogated. The impression one gathers from these encounters is one of physical containment, which is also mirrored by the lowering of the inferior’s voice and his or her careful avoidance of inappropriate topics.³³

With reference to the domestic sphere, Dawit, a young man in his late twenties, told me that “An obedient child is honourable/proper; a silent child is honourable/proper” (*tazaz lij chewa new; zimmitegna lij chewa new*) (Malara & Boylston 2016). Quarrels with one’s parents are, of course, not infrequent; and yet, they are regarded as serious violations of social etiquette, and the commandment “honour thy father and thy mother.” Conflicts of this kind take on their full shaming potential when they occur outside domestic walls, before ever-watchful, chastising gaze of the neighbourhood. In this context, shame too appears to be highly contagious: the running mouth of the son brings shame upon him, but also on the entire kin group. A young person quarrelling with an elder or a person of some social standing is likely to shame his family, which will become subject to public scrutiny and judgment for its failure to produce socio-morally contained offspring.

The mouth, thus, is an orifice no less religiously problematic than those discussed in the previous sections, in need of attentive control and regulation. While quarrels and insults are at odds with the peacefulness required to take the Eucharist, again, drinking *s’ebel* can help to pacify one’s insolence—something I discuss more thoroughly in the last section of in this chapter. By contrast, as I illustrate below, other substances achieve opposite effects.

³³ Of course, I am not implying that overt displays of deference in this context are always expressive of genuine feelings of respect; but, as I shall discuss at greater length in the next chapter, the performance of submission and containment is considered to be a normative form of relating to power, and the one most likely to elicit favour, irrespective of its sincerity.

The knots of a rude tongue

Given the importance of self-containment in various contexts of social interaction, my informants were greatly worried about those substances that facilitate the externalization of aggressive feelings and the enactment of transgressive behaviours. As Kidus, a friend of Fitsum's who owns a small bar serving local liquor (*araqi bet*) in Piassa, put it:

You see a lot of drunk people enjoying and playing and, especially when you are young, you think that this is a good life. But when you drink you open up, and you do not know shame (*ifret atawkim*). So you do all sorts of bad things because you don't have control, you don't know yourself (*rasun atawkim*). You think that you are relaxing, instead you become more aggressive and you insult people and you will get into a fight. We have a saying Diego: "One [glass] quenches the thirst, two makes you smile, three makes you insult and fight."

Alcohol undoes the invisible barriers of shame and social etiquette erected around the Orthodox self through a long process of socialization. It allows for an unchecked spilling-out of words and, as Kidus noted, "It unties the knots of a rude tongue." On the one hand, alcohol is attributed the transformative capacity of turning a normally peaceful person into an aggressive one. On the other, many informants insist that drunkenness is simply revelatory of inhibited aspects of personhood—"things that one would not normally say and do but that he constantly thinks," as Fitsum put it. Significantly, Kidus explicitly contrasted *s'ebel* and alcohol as the reversals of each other:

S'ebel makes you think of God, calms you down, and reminds you of what God wants from you. You cannot live selfishly and you have to respect others and help them as you can. When you are drunk, you see only yourself and your problems, and even if you are angry at yourself, you direct this anger to others, forgetting respect and limits. You want to drink more and more; you don't care what happens to people or if you hurt them through insults that break their bones, or if you punch them. This is how sin works, and this is the lie of alcohol. But the next morning you regret a lot.

In this section, I have highlighted how many apprehensions about the dangers implicit in the management of boundaries that I have described are informed by the same aesthetics of sealing and containment that inform discourses about unchecked biological flows. In the sphere of moral states, feelings, and action *s'ebel* addresses effectively situations of critical permeability and uncontrolled flow by re-orienting the Orthodox subject towards divine law, spiritual disposition, and pious docility. In the next section, I turn to an examination of the ethical and spiritual affordances of *s'ebel*, to show that the formation of Christian persons requires the regulation of simultaneous

forms of closure and openness: closure to specific aspects of bodily and social life, and openness to the spiritual agency of God and intimate others.

5. The flow of blessing

In order to reflect on the specific affordances and potentialities of *s'ebel*, I take my cue from Maya Mayblin's argument on the mobility of grace:

[Grace] cleaves to the particular, to individuals, even to spots and crevices in the landscape. It is harder to share. In Catholicism it is individuals who embody holiness—the paradigmatic example [...] being the saint, who stands [...] as the container par excellence of the sacred. [...] Grace can leak, be contained, be transferred in objects, and even passed among humans through sheer proximity. But there is always a conscious or ethical labour involved. Without the ethical labour of humans, grace does not travel, it sticks to the person on whom it was bestowed. Grace [...] is barrier sensitive. As such Catholics must travel in order to benefit from the spill-over of holiness and virtue. Hence the practice of pilgrimage, or the custom of travelling to obtain the blessing of an ordained priest [...]. Touch is often essential for transmission to work. Hence, in Catholicism the touching of relic, the laying of hands—these kinaesthetic are not just symbolic, they provide quite a literal technology of contagion. (Mayblin 2017:151-152).

In the Ethiopian context, blessing inheres to specific places; and yet *s'ebel* allows for its productive spilling out into the mundane world. Like grace, the blessing contained in *s'ebel* necessitates specific forms of human ethical labour in order to be extended to others, and for its positive contagion to be effectively transmitted. Below, I examine the greater proclivity of *s'ebel* to be shared, in contrast with the Eucharist. I pay close attention to the material affordances and ritual regulations of these two sacred substances, and illustrate how *s'ebel* allows the performance of a crucial spiritual work of care and protection outside churches, embedded in a sociality of blessing more democratic than that of the Eucharist, allowing for a number of spiritual relations of lay intercession (see Chapter Three)—relations through which Orthodox lives and subjects are made and remade.

S'ebel, motherly priesthood, and domestic rituals

Daniel, a man in his late twenties, remembered how his mother made him drink *s'ebel* before any life event of significance—ranging from school exams to embarking on a trip to a distant region of the country. She would make him kneel down in a curtained corner of their home, known as the “house of prayer” (*s'elot bet*). Looking up, Daniel could see three plasticised images—Christ, the Virgin Mary, and Saint Michael—looking severely and yet benevolently at him. The angel Michael is the protector of the household. Daniel's mother has offered countless vows to him for the benefit of

all family members (see Chapter Two). Standing behind Daniel, his mother would place a hand on his shoulder while staring intensely at the image of the angel, and muttering a prayer in a barely perceptible voice, which Daniel could not hear. After, she would give a glass of *s'ebel* to her son, who would drink diligently after uttering “Amen” in response to a prayer he did not understand.

The *s'ebel* came from the nearby church consecrated to Saint Michael, the same church that Daniel’s mother attended regularly in order to nurture and renew her relationship with the saint. To paraphrase Daniel, the *s'ebel* was the substantial stuff of the relationship between his mother and the saint, and, through her mediation, of the relationship between all her children and the saint. Indeed, all of Daniel’s four brothers, willingly or unwillingly, have undergone the same ritual several times in their lives. In performing a ritual reminiscent of a popularized version of the Eucharist, the mother assumed a quasi-priestly role. Her ritual performance allowed her to enact her care for her children by making herself into the last ring of a chain of intercession reaching to God through Saint Michael.

Daniel candidly related: “For many years this ritual didn’t make full sense to me; I would just obey my mother.” Yet, he also admitted: “I came to believe in it because it worked. As a child I felt protected and I learned that *s'ebel* is good for many problems.” In retrospect, he conjectured:

It makes clear sense to me now that I am older. My mother did this because she has a history (*tarik*) with Michael and it worked all the time. I would pass my exams, being brilliant and focused. I really love Michael and we have a close relationship. I think that this is because of my mother, who little by little made me drink the *s'ebel* of Michael and prayed for me even when I lacked the words and didn’t have a strong faith. Because of my mother, now Michael is like my father.

Daniel’s tale throws into sharp relief an essentially relational attitude to Christian personhood and self-formation. In his work on Indonesian Christian converts, Keane (2007) illustrates how Christian subjects are made to recognize their interiority as the only real source of agency through, for instance, practices of sincere speech: a speech isomorphic to, and expressive of, prior individual thoughts. This emphasis on sincerity and its overarching linguistic ideology has wider implications for projects of purification whereby converts are enjoined to discriminate between entities possessing agency, and others to which this faculty is wrongly attributed. Specifically, agency is a prerogative of humans and God alone, and attributing it to objects, spirits, and places constitutes a displacement of agency amounting to fetishism. What is more, taking an

agentive stance towards one's thoughts—through a recognition and valorisation of one's self-determining agency—necessitates a break from material and social entanglements, which Indonesian converts deem to conflict with direct, personal relationships with the divine. Daniel's case, I suggest, illustrates that Orthodox strategies of subjectification proceed from significantly different assumptions.

The moulding of Daniel's Christian subjectivity was not primarily a matter of recognising his agency, nor did it started off as a conscious cultivation of interiority. Instead, it began as a process shaped by the cumulative and overlapping actions of external others, both human and non-human: the saint, the mother, and the Holy Spirit acting through *s'ebel* (cf. Klaitz 2009, 2010). *S'ebel*'s efficacy is not necessarily contingent upon any sincere disposition, as the case of little Shiferraw in the opening vignette illustrates. Nor does the understanding of the ritual framework of administering *s'ebel* affect the capacity of the sacred substance to act on believers, as Daniel's initial confusion about his mother's actions attests. This is partially because the power of *s'ebel* is activated by a divine figure "above"—even when the water is blessed by a priest—and not from "below," that is, by consumers. In some cases, my informants proposed that faith enhances *s'ebel*'s capacity to heal and sanctify. But, in my informants' narratives, faith is often understood as a form of resignation, submission, and trust in God, rather than a matter of propositional belief; and faith is never deemed to be an exclusive pre-requisite for ritual efficacy. Indeed, through the power of *s'ebel*, God can chose to heal patently unfaithful individuals—even Muslims—or the most unrepentant sinners, just to display His power to them or to others, or in order to bring His creatures back to the right path.

In the context of the domestic ritual described, speech obviously does not index the interiority of the intended recipient of blessing. And yet, supported by the salvific power of *s'ebel*, the mother's prayer achieved its declared aims, according to a quasi-sacramental logic that foregrounds divine, angelic, and motherly agency while bracketing Daniel's own. In other words, *s'ebel* consumption is not taken to demonstrate the agency of the consumer; rather the act of consumption is portrayed as an event in which something "happens to people" (see Reed 2006). As I emphasise throughout this thesis, Orthodoxy's capacity to produce interlocking chains of intercession, together with the markedly partible and distributable character of

blessing, enables Orthodoxy to exceed the intentionality of specific individuals in bringing about its intended results (Mayblin, Norget & Napolitano & 2017).

Furthermore, Daniel and his brothers were effectively brought into historically pre-existing nets of protective relations—relations between mother and saint, saint and God, and all of those actors with the sacred space from which the *s'ebel* was sourced. At the same time, the administration of *s'ebel* was a strategy to draw the saint into close relations of spiritual kinship with the family—“because of my mother, now Michael is my father,” as Daniel said. By drawing on the potency of these relationships—and by drawing people into this relational matrix—the intercessory work of Daniel’s mother represents a counterpoint to the, strictly localized, and male only masculine, clerical control of the Eucharist—the vertical axis of the “geometry of blessing” evoked in my Introduction. We could go further by saying that *s'ebel* itself is the counterpoint of the Eucharistic sacrament. Counterpoints here are not antagonistic to institutional religiosity, but complementary to it. Such complementarity becomes evident, and its import fully appreciable, if we refocus our attention away from the core institutional scenarios of ritual life to ritual’s most mundane and intimate performative arenas (Coleman 2014:290). The far-reaching popular priesthood of mothers and the versatility of *s'ebel* preform a crucial work, diffusing blessing within communities and houses and improving the life of believers—a work without which, very likely, the institutional church could not survive.

For both Daniel and his mother, *s'ebel* embodies the spiritual potency of a church and its patron—a power now accessible in a corner of their own home. In many ways, *s'ebel* can be viewed as “the portable church,” a notion the discussion below attempts to elucidate.

S'ebel as the portable church

The city is not simply the worldliest of all places; its heterogeneous geography comprises spiritual spaces and corners, where God is perceived to be more present and active—including churches and *s'ebel* shrines (see Introduction and Chapter One). The consecration of churches and *s'ebel* sources attests of the fact that Addis Ababa participates in a history in which God does things in given places. As already noted, substances and objects contained within the circumscribed space of the church walls

are impregnated with divine blessing. In churches, believers seek intimate sensorial engagement with this sacredness by kissing icons and crosses, touching sacred walls, and inhaling the scent of frankincense burnt during solemn rites. Attending a mass, sitting pensively on a bench in the church's yard, or leaning on the wall of a church building in prayer, are all described as forms of an immersion in a pervasive field of holiness, which triggers sensations of soothing peace and respite from the restless rhythms and hardship of life in the busy capital.

The relative mobility of *s'ebel* allows for the creation of shared experiences of sacred intimacy outside churches, in mundane spaces. *S'ebel* can be fetched from a church, stored in bottles, brought into the house, drunk during a trip, sprayed on one's face while at work, and so forth. The experience of *s'ebel* consumption in any given place maps closely on to the experience of being on sacred ground. As Vivian Sobchak notes with reference to the phenomenology of cinema viewing, "We are always grounded in the radical materialism of bodily immanence," but "always also have the capacity for *transcendence*: for a unique exteriority of being—an ex-stasis—that locates us 'elsewhere' and 'otherwise' even as it is grounded in and tethered to our lived body's 'here' and 'now'" (2008:197). This ecstatic possibility—that of being somewhere while tapping into the power and sensation of a sacred elsewhere—is what makes *s'ebel* a particularly valuable spiritual resource in the context of urban life. *S'ebel* is, in this sense, a sort of "portable church."

I once caught my friend Samson, an ambitious university student who acted as my research assistant on occasion, drinking *s'ebel* secretly on the top floor of the hotel Taytu, just before embarking upon the tedious work of transcribing my interviews. He explained:

Before I came here today I felt very nervous. People squeezed onto the minibus annoyed me. I even insulted them in my head. I thought: "Fuck you, peasant! I am going to work and you have no manners." I started thinking about all the problems I have in my life and I worried about my visa application, my exams, and so on. Then the minibus stopped by the church of Saint George. I went quickly in and asked for *s'ebel* to drink [which he put in a plastic bottle]. And then I rushed here. After drinking the *s'ebel*, I felt immediately better. I am more relaxed and I smile. I stopped caring about people and I said: "God knows my worries; I will leave them to Him." And then I started thinking: "What was inside me? What was around me in the minibus packed with people? In these days there are many people who have demons inside them."

Much like fasting, *s'ebel* consumption is animated by the promise of escaping the pains, stress, and excessive worldliness of daily life (see Chapter Three). The frugal

consumption of *s'ebel* within or outside sacred spaces—even in a hotel—is one of the ways in which people try to strike some sort of balance between the intensive proximity with others that social life requires, and the retreat from worldly entanglements necessary to stay focused on God. *S'ebel* consumption helps shelter believers against their unruly passions and the pressure of human and non-human others impinging on the fragile boundaries of their porous selves. The swiftness in which the act of ingestion allows one to touch base with God is something particularly appreciated by busy, highly mobile urban believers like Samson.

As I noted earlier, *s'ebel* springs are spatial indices of a direct, historical intervention of the divine in this world—flowing testimonies of an act of abrupt transformation and sacred empowerment of worldly matter. *S'ebel* constantly reproduces and re-enacts this historic moment of divine infusion in the spring's endless flow.³⁴ Despite the impermanence of the substance, its infinite reproduction indexes the infinity of the God who created such a flow. The same symbolism applies for *s'ebel* produced and reproduced through clerical ritual action in churches: *s'ebel* can be reproduced *ad libitum*, no matter how much of it is consumed (cf. Boylston 2012, 2013). Even in these cases, the transforming agency intervening in human history and inflecting holiness upon matter is understood to lie beyond the priest, who is a mere channel of divine force. As the possibility of the endless reproduction of *s'ebel* echoes the infinite nature of the divine, it also bears witness to God's boundless mercy—a mercy that is always readily accessible to the widest number of people in the many churches and sacred sites that punctuate the urban landscape.

As I have suggested, given the intimate association between *s'ebel* and the place where it comes from, the experience of consuming *s'ebel* is one of intense connection to its source and its patron. Consuming *s'ebel* is a form of direct participation in the historicity of the divine action that constitutes the sacredness of the substance. In short, *s'ebel* intake is an ecstatic technique, in that it draws the believer beyond himself or herself and into a wider, collective history of relationships between humanity, divinity and place. Finally, *s'ebel* consumption is motivated by individual worries, concerns, and sorrows; and yet it does much to inscribe such worries, concerns, and sorrows—

³⁴ Commonly, when a given *s'ebel* source dries up, believers speculate that this event is linked to divine displeasure: with the clergy, if the source is found in a church, or with the way in which access to the source has been managed if it is located in a shrine.

as well as the consumer—into a larger historical and cosmological frame, thus relativizing them.

***S'ebel*, community, and reciprocity**

After receiving the Eucharist from a priest, communicants ingest it quickly and retreat to silence and solitude. They are advised to go home and speak as little as possible with others they encounter on their way, so as to prevent quarrels that would defile the sacrament they bear inside their bodies. Some informants do not even kiss or shake hands with others after having taken the Eucharist. At home, communicants often lie down while reading religious texts or listening to religious music for several hours. When consuming their meals, people who have partaken of the Eucharist eat from a single plate set aside for them—something that some informants deem to be a prophylaxis against envy aroused by food consumption. This style of consumption is a reversal of the ordinary commensality of the shared *injera*, consumed from a same dish by the entire family. The Eucharist cannot be fractioned nor shared with others: communion is an individual matter and an individualizing ritual act—at least with regards to its most immediate social effects.³⁵

By virtue of its material propensities and its less stringent ritual regulations, *s'ebel* allows for a wider number of applications and uses. It can be ingested; applied to bodies, objects, and spaces; kept in the house to serve as an apotropaic protection; and, crucially, shared with kin, neighbours, and friends. Such versatility is particularly relevant to those people who, because of life circumstances and states of bodily impurity, cannot access sacred spaces. As the opening vignette indicates, the restrictions surrounding impure and uncontained bodies might be circumvented through a number of creative strategies, relying on the purer bodies of others who might access, fetch, transport, and touch the *s'ebel*. When my friend Genet, a woman in her thirties, moved into her new house thirty days after she gave birth, she asked her sister to spill *s'ebel* all across the new habitation two days before she would enter it. “One never knows what they did in the house before, or what might be hidden inside,” Genet said, alluding to occult activities and sorcery materials. Despite her

³⁵ Some informants, however, would hasten to stress that to partake to the flesh and blood of Christ is effectively to achieve communion with the wider community of believers who are tied to the same source of sacred potency by virtue of their divine filiation.

exclusion from tactile engagement with *s'ebel*, Genet felt greatly reassured that the environment that her impure body inhabited was now soaked in protective blessing.

Furthermore, as I have shown, the rules surrounding *s'ebel* consumption lend themselves to more flexible contextual negotiations when compared with the uncompromising ritual proscriptions regulating Eucharistic intake. Having received the blessing of a priest ten days after the delivery of her twins, my friend Shewaye felt confident to leave her house, but was not yet allowed to touch *s'ebel*. Nevertheless, she did not hesitate to take a bottle of *s'ebel* and pour it over the carcass of a chicken she found at her doorstep upon leaving her house early one morning. Wary of the prohibition of touching even the *s'ebel* container while in a state of ritual impurity, she explained:

I did not touch the *s'ebel* directly. I hoped God would understand and forgive me. I know that God would prefer me to be safe. People transfer their sickness onto these chickens, then they kill them and leave them in the street. We call it “the thrown chicken” (*ye toss doro*) or *denqara*. Unless you pour *s'ebel* on it, you will fall sick if you step on the carcass. My children could have got sick and I was scared, God knows this and He did not punish me.

Shewaye asked her neighbour to apply some *s'ebel* on the body of her children—“just in case”, she said—and conjectured that her neighbour’s help allowed her not to touch the *s'ebel* with “bare and impure hands”, thus not openly countervailing a ritual restriction. Beyond the conundrums generated by purity rules and their negotiation, the point that I want to make is that, because of its greater versatility, *s'ebel* helps make life sustainable and navigable in places where the stuff of evil and sin abounds. Moreover, the efficacy of *s'ebel* is often enabled by social relationships with others. As such, unlike the Eucharist, *s'ebel* can be included in circles of shared reciprocity that link domestic and inter-domestic spheres—the very same circles in which shared substance, like food, moves, helping people to care for each other and making their quotidian uncertainties endurable.

Indeed, Orthodox orientations towards the social diffusion of blessing are particularly evident in the sociality of neighbourliness—a sociality from which the Eucharist is excluded due to its containment within churches, categorical indivisibility, and subjection to strict clerical control. Good neighbourliness requires people to share utensils, labour, knowledge, and food. However, while many such forms of sharing may be characterized by a relative degree of reticence, depending on a number of factors—one’s real or claimed indigence, a conflictual relationship, envy, and so

forth—sharing *s'ebel*, especially in cases of emergency, is something that none my informants would refrain from doing, regardless of any contextual consideration. More than an extension of the ethics of good neighbourliness, the give and take of *s'ebel* is considered to be another articulation of the Christian duty of expanding circles of blessing to incorporate others (cf. Pitt-Rivers 2011). As I have noted in earlier chapters, blessing—whatever its form—is by definition not meant to be retained, but circulated. It is in circulation that one might hope to solicit the generous dispensation of further blessing on behalf of God: sharing blessing is spiritually meritorious in the eyes of God, and one needs to keep sharing blessing if s/he hopes to receive more. By contrast, selfish retention of blessing would invariably turn blessing into curse.

6. Conclusion

This chapter has explored Ethiopian Orthodox apprehensions with permeability, containment and flow, and the different bodily and socio-moral states and practices they underpin. I have illustrated how such practices and states might preclude access to different substantial instantiations of the sacred—specifically, *s'ebel* and the Eucharist. But, more importantly, I have argued that the propensities of *s'ebel* as liquid blessing, as well as the relative flexibility of the ritual rules regulating access to it, allow for a range of intimate experiences of the sacred, even in conditions of problematic permeability and lack of containment.

In many ways, *s'ebel*'s partibility, transportability, and propensity for social diffusion reinforces collective orientations towards religiosity, as well as a sense of belonging to a larger Orthodox community. It is often through the other-oriented ethical labour of kin, friends and neighbours that *s'ebel* can travel from bounded sacred spaces, and cross the threshold of households, to be shared widely with others in need. The orientation of such labour, and its collaborative quality, exemplify the notion that redemption and access to blessing are not solely a matter of individual responsibility, but the outcome of a concerted plural endeavour. The type of ritual community marked by the endless circuits of *s'ebel* circulation is not primarily one of “imagination” (cf. Heo 2015). As Birgit Meyer notes:

[I]maginations are required to become tangible outside the realm of the mind, by creating a social environment that materializes through the structuring of space, architecture, ritual performance, and by inducing bodily sensations [...] in order to become experienced as real, imagined communities need to materialize in the concrete lived environment and be felt in the bones. (Meyer 2009:5)

Indeed, the ties that hold together those partaking of the same *s'ebel*—if loosely and precariously—are experienced chiefly in the visceral act of sacred consumption, and its ensuing affective responses. The relatedness produced is less an issue of representation than one of embodiment, less one of knowing and imagining than one of sharing the experience of intimacy with sacred power with troubled neighbours, kin one cares for, and disparate social others. And while sustaining and reinforcing these social ties, the shared consumption of *s'ebel* connects people partaking of the same substance to a common source of miraculous, healing, and redemptive divine efficacy—often intensely localized in sacred shrines and churches. In this sense, *s'ebel* consumption reveals new dimensions of the argument I have developed in previous chapters: that the making and remaking of Orthodox subjects and lives is largely enabled by relational networks, animated by a religious ethics of doing-for, doing-with, and doing on behalf of others.

In the next chapter I turn to the use of *s'ebel* in ritual healing, highlighting how issues of containment, permeability, and intimacy discussed in this chapter are also crucial to deliverance from malevolent spiritual agents.

CHAPTER V

THE DEVIL, THE HOLY WATER, AND THE ARCHANGEL MICHAEL

Prologue: Abebe and his demons

When I met Abebe, he was in his early thirties. A skinny man of dark complexion and frail in appearance, Abebe was initially too shy to look me in the eye when I asked him a question. He sat, nervous, with his knees spread apart, sunken into a cheap, old armchair in the Taytu hotel's lobby. "Don't worry, he acts like this in his shop when a customer comes in too," the mutual friend who had introduced us reassured me. Abebe smiled timidly, and nodded silently to confirm. At the time we met, he worked in a tiny shop run by his family, selling "all sorts of things," as he put it. His family was far from being rich, but, as he was quick to stress, unlike many families in his rather destitute neighbourhood, they had enough for everyone to eat three meals a day. "This is something one has to thank God for nowadays," Abebe remarked, this time with confidence.

When we spoke about religious topics, Abebe's shyness gave way to a certain severity. He talked with the soft and yet decisive tone of one who takes the subject seriously, and feels that his direct experience confers on him the authority to produce a perceptive and truthful narrative—a narrative validated by suffering which others could not understand or explain.

Abebe's problems had started when he was working in a carpentry shop. A generalized sense of "stress" (*cinqet*) made him unable to focus: "Even if I worked, I was never satisfied with what I did. I even started to spoil other people's work." At the same time, he began experiencing severe pain in his joints and chest—"as if they were pierced by a spear"—which made working even harder. His poor work performance and growing irritability led to countless fights with his employer, who eventually fired him. The stress soon turned into anger. As he had it, "I lost patience easily. I was constantly angry and I started talking back to my elders... I, who used to be such a shy and

respectful son.” Abebe perceived the open quarrels he had with his father as being particularly at odds with the Ethiopian etiquette of deference—“This is outside our culture,” he explained—and as “behaviour which is not Christian.” According to his mother, the chief reason for the quarrelling was Abebe’s inability to keep the job secured for him by his father through personal ties with the owner of the workshop. At that time, Abebe’s actions were considered signs of ungratefulness; his actions were shameful, since they jeopardized his father’s reputation in the eyes of the employer—and, most worryingly, of neighbours and family friends.

Unemployed and hopeless, Abebe developed an addiction to *khat*. The family tried to cover it up for some time, but it soon became public, piling further shame on the household. He succeeded in convincing his mother to lend him money on several occasions, but the money was soon spent on feeding his addiction. Too ashamed to admit his failures to anybody but his mother, Abebe begged her to intercede with his father so that the older man could lend him a sum necessary to start a small business. However, according to his mother, any attempt at mediation was met by her husband’s unconditional refusal. Following these refusals, new quarrels between father and son erupted, more violent than before. The father stopped talking to Abebe, but not before having threatened to banish him from the house. Frustrated with the silence of his father, and with the level of irresolvable tension that the conflict had reached, Abebe decided to leave.

He left the house in a state of confusion that he described as “not knowing myself.” Resolute to leave Ethiopia in order “to change my life,” Abebe embarked on a journey east. He explained: “I remembered that when I was little I overheard that this is the passage to Djibouti that people take when they want to leave the county.” But by the time he reached Matehara, a town in central Ethiopia, he found himself short of money, and worried that he did not know what he was doing or where he was going. One night he was sitting on the shore of nearby lake Basaka, when he felt an uncanny desire to enter the water—despite the fact that he could not swim. He recounted: “It was like being in a movie: I could see this happening but I could not control it. [...] My body was moving, and I was desperate because of the life I had...

Then, when I was almost in the water I said: ‘My Lady [Mary], come to me’ (*Immebete derrashelin*)’”. After this desperate appeal, Abebe explained, “I felt that the spirit that was on my back was leaving.” It was the first time Abebe realized that he had been under the influence of a malignant, alien force. Confused and even more frightened, he returned to his family in Addis Ababa. His family members had been worried, of course; but suspecting that his escape had been a consequence of his quarrels with his father, and hoping to avoid further conflicts and another escape, they did not ask too many questions. Abebe kept what happened by the lake that night to himself, haunted as he was by the fear of unidentified powers at work within him, and afraid of the potential reactions of his family.

After an unspecified period of time, Abebe heard from a close friend about Shinkuro Mikael, a famous *s’ebel* shrine located on a hill a few kilometres away from Addis Ababa. With no particular expectation, he decided to visit the site on a Sunday morning. There he met a “kind stranger,” a man who advised him to bathe in one of the many *s’ebel* pools. As he immersed himself in the water something happened. “I lost consciousness (*rasen satku*; literally, I lost myself),” he told me in an agitated fashion. Abebe struggled to leave the pool; his limbs moved frantically in the water; he shouted at people nearby, asking for help to get out; he cursed at the stranger who took him there. But something was holding him down. The spirit inside him spoke. Abebe remarked emphatically: “I have to thank God that there was a woman sitting there [near the pool]... She and the man who took me there listened to what the demon said.”³⁶ As he regained consciousness, the two people promptly reported to him what had happened. “They told me that I said ‘I will return with my mother and my sister on Saint Michael’s day’. But it wasn’t me speaking. It was the spirit... I went home and I told my mother what happened. She loves Michael very much so she said: ‘It’s an invitation from Michael, I won’t miss it for any reason’.”

On the appointed day, Abebe went to Shinkuro Mikael with his mother, sister, and older brother. As he touched the water, the spirit spoke again: “I

³⁶ In Shinkuro Mikael, the terms “demon” and “spirit” are used interchangeably, and I do the same in the text.

screamed a lot, I struggled a lot... The spirit said that it was a *zar*³⁷ which has been in the family for a long time. My mother was frightened. She had never seen anything like that. She cried a lot. I didn't know all this [he was in a trance] but the spirit told my mother: 'Don't worry, the angel Michael has seized me'."

Abebe and his mother stayed at the site for several months. His brother and sister also spent protracted periods with them. They all started undergoing regular ritual ablutions, and eventually, something unexpected happened: the same spirit manifested itself through Abebe's mother. The *zar* revealed itself to be at the root of many family conflicts. Many secrets were unveiled, many obscure events in family history explained. Neither Abebe nor his mother felt comfortable elaborating at length on issues perceived as "very private." But what they both agreed on was that the conflicts dividing the household, as well as Abebe's chronic bad luck, failure, addiction, and insubordination, were all caused by an evil power beyond his or other family members' control.

Abebe was freed from his spirit after two months, his mother after six. "The main spirit was on my mother,"³⁸ Abebe explained. Throughout their stay in Shinkuro Mikael, Abebe and his mother woke up at dawn, attended the pre-mass service (*kidan*), took regular baths in the *s'ebel* pools early in the morning, and drank *s'ebel* in the nearby eucalyptus forest before eating anything. Abebe and his mother also underwent confession regularly, and sought the advice of local priests on matters concerning prayer and other spiritual concerns. Abebe said that this experience radically changed his life: "Now I know the importance of prayer. I pray every morning and every night. Now I know the power of *s'ebel*. I saw that God is above everything." Both Abebe and his mother maintained that the quarrels had disappeared, enabling various family members—including Abebe's father—to agree on

³⁷ Type of family spirit.

³⁸ Abebe and his mother said that there were many spirits inside them. However, their narratives foreground the *zar* spirit as the main cause of their problems, and indicate that other spirits would not have been able to intrude upon them if it was not for "the *zar* that opened the gates to them," in Abebe's words. Other spirits were seldom mentioned in our conversations.

starting a modest business where Abebe is employed. It has proven to be quite successful.

1. Introduction

The anthropology of spirit possession in Ethiopia has focused mostly on adorcistic forms of possession, such as the endemic *zar* cult (Aspen 2001; Leiris 1988; Messing 1958; Mercier 1986, 1996, 1997b; Morton 1973, 1977; Palmisano 2002; Young 1975a). Exorcism is dismissed as an ethnographically uninteresting spiritual exercise, where healing is merely a matter of “good words,” “holy water,” and, in the final analysis, a “medicine of the soul” (Mercier 1979a:118). In contrast to the story of possession sketched above, Judith Hermann describes the life of the person visiting sites like Shinkuro Mikael as a form of extra-mundane asceticism, a popularization of monastic styles of living aimed at breaking away from the “world of men,” which necessitate a neat separation from familial ties (2010:237-240; cf. Kaplan 1984, 1986; Mercier 1988, 1997a). Such views risk reproducing the overtly individualistic bias of classic studies of Ethiopian Orthodox society, which I have tried to challenge and nuance over the course of this thesis. In classifying forms of other-worldly breakage with familial others and ascetic acts as the real essence of healing, various studies implicitly reproduce the paradigm of the “impossible religion” (see Introduction), overlooking and obscuring the importance of mundane social networks based on kinship within which affliction arises and therapy unfolds. These are networks that, I will suggest, are not extraneous to, but tightly implicated in the sphere of the “spiritual.”

In this chapter, I argue that exorcism is a quintessentially relational process, predicated on eminently relational notions of personhood. While previous chapters have illustrated the salience of circulating blessing among intimately related persons, and the relevance of multiple boundaries in this process, this chapter highlights how demons, too, “circulate” between the bodies of various kin. This form of circulation, I will illustrate, points to critical failures in the management of personal and domestic boundaries, revealing new and unexpected issues of boundedness, permeability, and relatedness beyond those discussed so far. I argue that exorcism is less an individual quest for deliverance, than it is a process through which communal familial suffering is addressed. In other words, exorcism is a plural process, entailing the coordinated ethical and ritual labour of variously inter-related individuals, and, as such, its logic

appears continuous with the Orthodox ethics of doing-for and doing-with explored thus far.

Through the analysis of a single case of possession—and my familiarity with that of many others—I will show how exorcism brings into heightened visibility a number of human actors (possessed people, spectators of trance events, kin) and non-human actors (demons, angels, God), casting their complex mutual relationships in sharp relief. The liminal space of Shinkuro Mikael is the stage of a drama that is intimate and cosmic all at once. It is a drama in which believers come to develop a clearer awareness of the antagonism between divine and demonic cosmic forces. And, through their interpellation into this confrontation, believers realize the direct relevance of these cosmic forces to their shared suffering as families. Through the agency of demons, problematic kin relationships become visible in a new light; and through these kin relationships, demonic threats are exposed and apprehended. Similarly, if the genesis of possession is often to be traced to the kin relationships of the possessed person, it is only through complex ritual manipulation of these same relationships that exorcism can succeed. Together with the excision of an undesired demonic entity, exorcism affords the possibility of effecting productive realignments of tense domestic relations and, as I will argue, domestic realignments in turn contribute to positive changes in the relationships between individuals and the divine.

The subtle recalibrations of domestic authority involved in these realignments, and the reconfiguration of multiple forms of vulnerability they require, reveal how spirits' insertion in and excision from human frames does “not solve or simplify” troubled social “situations so much as they thicken them”—charging them with new religious significance and ethical responsibility in creative and often unexpected ways (Masquelier 2011:177; see Boddy 1993, 1994). Before dealing with these aspects of my argument, however, I will provide a description of Shinkuro Mikael and its peculiarities, highlighting the capacity of this sacred site to make specific figures and relationships visible and speakable—a process without which exorcism cannot progress.

2. Entering the field of Michael

Shinkuro Mikael is a sacred site situated a few kilometres outside Addis Ababa, past Mount Entoto. A vast, open field located in the highland plateau, it is dotted with

different *s'ebel* pools, and dominated by a church consecrated to the archangel Michael. The pools' names evoke the imagery of biblical geography: *Meskel Bet* (the house of the cross), *Yordanos* (Jordan River), and so forth.³⁹ In Shinkuro Mikael, everything is holy and saturated with divine blessing: the water is *s'ebel*, which burns demons and cures every sickness; the soil is *emihnet* (faith), which heals wounds and skin diseases. The pervasiveness of blessing is a consequence of the fact that the site is the angel Michael's property, imbued with the charisma and potency of his sacred persona. Michael is commonly referred as the "owner" (*balebet*) of the site, and everything within it falls under his control. However, as the discussion below illustrates, Michael's form of ownership is not that of a bureaucrat, but rather that of a jealous lord who exerts his violent power without restraint. Michael is the archangel specifically charged with control over demons, and the one who defeated the ancient enemy, the rebellious angel Satanael (Satan), in the battle that divided heavens.

Given the holiness of the place, a number of ritual interdictions apply to those who visit it. The flux of people, bodily substances, objects and activities is regulated by strategies of separation, aimed at preventing the cross-contamination of spiritual and worldly spheres. Before entering the site, visitors have to pass over a bridge—locally described as "custom control" (*kela*)—where some of the people working for the church built on the site ask them whether they had sex the night before, or, in the case of women, whether they are subject to any post-partum taboos—conditions deemed incompatible with access to the sacred site.⁴⁰ People are forbidden to step on holy ground with shoes, just as in church buildings. Smoking, chewing *khat*, and drinking coffee are prohibited. People who have open wounds and women who are menstruating are not allowed to enter the pools. Restrictions on movement and action, and the requirements of bodily purity, experientially inscribe the intense sense of sacredness at the site in the embodied subjectivity of the visitor. As we have seen, the logic of this inscription relies on the drawing of parallels between spatial and bodily boundaries, and mimics some of the purity restrictions that apply to Eucharistic consumption (see Chapters Three and Four).

³⁹ Mimetic naming practices of this kind are common in Ethiopian toponymy, both marking the sacredness of a place and appropriating some of the power inherent in the biblical prototype.

⁴⁰ Beyond monitoring access to the site, priests working in the church (and some lay helpers) collect cheap rent on the small huts where possessed people and their kin live. But, as I will illustrate, priests retain little or no control over the course of exorcism.

Those who visit the site describe their experience as a journey from the most polluted and worldly of all places—the city—into a place “not-of-this-world.” This retreat through movement resonates with Peter Brown’s description of saints’ shrines in late antiquity:

By localizing the holy in this manner [in specific holy sites] [...] Christianity could feed on the facts of distance and the joys of proximity. The distance might be physical distance. For this, pilgrimage was the remedy [...] The pilgrim committed himself or herself to the “therapy of distance” by recognizing that what he or she wished was not to be had in the immediate environment [...] Pilgrimage remains essentially an act of leaving. But distance is there to be overcome; the experience of pilgrimage activates a yearning for intimate closeness. (1981:86-86)

The proximity that people seek in Shinkuro Mikael is proximity with a sacred power, which is embodied in various materials available to sensory experience at the shrine (see Josipovici 1996:59-61). Spending a period of time on the site is considered a *subahe*, an ascetic retreat from the world often described as a time of “temporary monkhood.” Excessive enmeshment in the realm of the worldly is a condition exemplified by addiction to substances like *khat*. Refraining from *khat* on-site does not simply amount to detoxification, but is rather part of an elaborate set of disciplinary techniques meant to re-arrange relationships between the person and the things of the fallen world. The person travelling to Shinkuro Mikael seeks to assert control over those things that mark his or her enslavement by worldly desire, while relinquishing control to a higher being, the angel.

People also visit this site to meet an angelic person and patron. Shinkuro Mikael, thus, is “not just the site of holiness and power, but rather the site of an encounter” (Josipovici 1996:61). At the same time, people go to such place in order to meet a demon: a demon that they suspect has been with them—and within them—for some time. Shinkuro Mikael is thus the site of revelation, as Michael’s power coerces demons into visibility, thereby creating a safe space for interacting with occult, dangerous forces affecting entire families. Revealing patrons and demons, and the possessed person’s relationships to them, also helps to draw kin relations into relief—both as sources of affliction and of potential healing.

Demons are particularly skilful at concealing their presence. The most manifest signs of possession might range from gastritis to paralysis, from apathy to stress. The intrinsic polysemy of such signs—as well as the uncertainty as to whether they should be taken as signs at all—makes detecting demons a notoriously complicated business.

Only the painful cries of the demon hiding within a human host constitute an incontrovertible diagnosis of spirit possession. Generally, these violent manifestations take place only in *s'ebel* shrines. Informants contrast them with the interpretative angst ensuing from demons' silence in the house, where families are left to wonder helplessly about the causes of their kin's suffering. Of course, people visiting Shinkuro Mikael are after more than a persuasive interpretation of their symptoms. As I have suggested, they want to see as clearly as possible the malevolent being at the root their affliction. As Brown notes, "the horror of the demonic [is] its very facelessness" (1981:110). Michael's efficacy lies in the fact that he can "concretize and, so, mercifully delimit and render manageable tense moments, by being able to perceive and isolate the demons lurking within" (ibid.) hosts' bodies when they enter his dominion.

The presence of the angel is dramatically evinced through his interactions with the demonic beings. Demons suffer under the power of Michael, confess their misdeeds, scream, and beg the angel to stop inflicting pain on them. To echo Brown, "nothing [gives] more palpable face to the unseen *presentia* of the saint than the heavy cries of the possessed" (1981:108). As Abebe explained, "Michael obliges demons to talk [...] You can't expect anything good from an evil spirit, but because they are afraid [of Michael] they say what Michael asks them to say." Abebe added, "The demons talk always about Michael. They say: 'descendant of Adam, Michael rose for you'." Demons often become mediators of the messages of an angel that humans cannot hear or see. As in the case of Abebe—whose demon reported Michael's request that the entire family should come to the sacred site—these messages are often crucial to the success of the therapeutic process, as they make the possessed person's kin aware of his or her situation and mobilize their support. The messages that people receive are both frightening and comforting, revealing the unruly power of the demonic, but also testifying to the benevolence of divine power and its superiority (cf. Brown 1981:107).

What distinguishes Shinkuro Mikael from similar shrines is the fact that priests and monks are forbidden to perform exorcisms there. The angel takes full charge of curing all kinds of diseases, and malevolent spirits are cast away by his wrath. Michael is not just the owner of this vast field, but also the only officiating "exorcist" (*atmaqi*; literally, baptizer). Stories suggest that in the past, priests tried to exorcise demons on

this site, but were either thrown violently on the ground by an invisible force, or became sick and temporarily paralyzed. As my friend Tesfay, a formerly possessed man, narrated:

There was a priest called Abba Taddesse who tried to baptize [exorcize] people here many years ago. But when he raised his cross, it was taken from his hand by an invisible power and stuck into the trunk of a tree. The priest was shocked and frightened and bowed down to ask for forgiveness. I have seen this cross and I can tell you that there is no nail or glue holding it on the tree.

One of the outcomes of the absence of priestly mediation is that the quotidian ritual routine of those who seek a cure in this shrine is far less strictly regulated than in similar sites (cf. Hermann 2009, 2010). Priests only provide advice through sermons and personal counselling to visitors of the shrine, but the degree of adherence to suggested ritual protocols varies significantly from person to person. Visitors are advised to drink *s'ebel* or bathe in it early in the morning. A large daily intake of *s'ebel* brings clean, divine power directly into the body, and causes the evacuation, through vomiting and defecation, of various materials—eggs, stones, snakes—taken to be signs of demonic activity. Bathing in *s'ebel* pools is mostly meant to reveal demons by “making them shout and talk,” in Abebe’s words, and eventually to cast them out.

The amount of time people spend on the site varies considerably. Some visit the site daily and return home afterwards. Others, like Abebe, reside there for prolonged periods, as exorcism can be an exceptionally long business—often taking months. During this time, the possessed person, frequently accompanied by family members, lives in one of the small huts scattered across the site. People submit themselves to a daily routine that, beside bathing in and drinking holy water, might include fasting, church attendance, and confession. The possessed person and his or her kin eat together, pray together, read religious texts to each other, assist each other during ritual ablutions, and listen compassionately to their mutual fears. Their co-presence in the healing site leads kin to focus on the inevitability of their relationships to one another; the fact that they are stuck with each other, as it were, bound by demons, a shared familial history, and divine forces. As I will illustrate, the spiritual framework of these interactions amongst kin makes readily visible the caring potential of their mutual relations, encouraging discussion that leads to forgiveness and compromise.

Crucially, for informants like Abebe, the revelations that demons make during trance—explanations of strange events in family history, disclosures of family secrets,

and exposures of the truth about conflicts plaguing the house—are key to the success of the exorcising process. As I will argue, demons make kin relationships visible and speakable in new ways often unimaginable in troubled domestic spaces. These regimes of visibility and discourse create felicitous conditions for the productive realignment of kin relationships; and these realignments, in many ways, represent the main therapeutic outcome of many such exorcisms.

Before I turn to unpacking the intersections of the demonic, the domestic, and the angelic, I wish to move the analytical focus away from the shrine as a site of visibility and heightened communication, and focus instead on a very different social arena where order is achieved and sustained through silence, pretence, and concealment: the household. Drawing the contrast between these sites of silence and revelation will provide the background against which the ritual and social dynamics considered in subsequent sections will be analysed.

3. The house and the order of silence and concealment

In previous chapters, I have focused mostly on kinship-based economies of spiritual care; but in this section I concentrate on the coercive, oppressive, and harmful aspects of domestic intimacy (see Carsten 2013; Geschiere 2013). Such aspects are tightly linked to a form of domestic ordering achieved through silence and concealment. Understanding dynamics of silence in the house, I suggest, is essential to fully appreciating the efficacy of the intensive modes of communication and regimes of visibility characteristic of Shinkuro Mikael, as well as the positive change in the quality of kin relations that exorcism brings about.

There is a broad academic consensus that hierarchy and deference are crucial fibres in the Ethiopian Orthodox social fabric (Boylston 2012, Levine 1965, Messay 1999). Donald Levine notes that “Reverence for one’s father is perhaps the key legitimating principle in the structure of [...] morality” (1965:83). Ideally, as my friend Seyoum put it, “When your father asks you to do something, ‘yes’ is the only answer... Or you can just remain silent and do what he asks even if you don’t want to do it. But you do it because he is your father.” In many households, especially in the absence of a fatherly figure, mothers are granted similar deference. Seyoum insisted that, “respecting one’s elders is the first commandment of house life.” Mothers, however, are perceived as more accessible; and interaction with them, though also regulated by

hierarchical codes, is often more intimate and informal. Deference towards authority is conveyed through various bodily and verbal acts. Avoiding eye contact with one's father when receiving a command, and bowing silently, for example, are powerful demonstrations of obedience. In conservative households, fathers can be addressed with epithets such as "my shield" (*gashe*) that ratify hierarchical distance and overtly acknowledge protective authority. Despite the fact that forms of comportment and degrees of filial intimacy may vary from household to household, the ideological basis of submissiveness is largely upheld by most people I came to know in Ethiopia. At the same time, my informants stressed that these principles can be hard to live by.

Abebe's story illustrates how respect might often imply suppressing one's own ambitions when they are not approved by one's elders. After losing his job, and having squandered his family's money, Abebe was refused any credit to start a new business from his father. This refusal, he remembered, "was as indisputable as a divine decree". Rather than questioning his father's authority more than he had already done—something he already regretted deeply—Abebe preferred to leave the house. As Fanta, a formerly possessed woman, put it, "The price of respect (*kibur*) is often suffering (*sikay*).” Fanta declined to marry a young blacksmith she was in love with because her parents, both merchants, threatened to disinherit her if she were to wed a person of inferior status, whose profession is often associated with the stigma of witchcraft (see Reminick 1974). Both Fanta and Abebe experienced pleasing elders, accepting their severe verdicts, and conceding to their unilateral demands as frustrating but necessary; for both of them, family life was animated by a fraught tension between individual desire and deference. Along these lines, many similar narratives suggest that domestic units are social fields where individuals occupying lower hierarchical positions are often condemned to silence—a point to which I shall return shortly. As the following section of this chapter shows, it is precisely these silenced tensions that find an open—even loud—articulation in Shinkuro Mikael.

Of course, young members of a given family are not straightforwardly deprived of all persuasive agency vis-à-vis their elders. But for one's request to be heard and one's desires to be made known, the intercession of mediators occupying higher hierarchical positions is often indispensable. Abebe's monetary request was not presented directly to his father, but was mediated by his mother. Her involvement rested on the assumption that mothers are the most able mediators, compelled by their intrinsic love

for their children to intercede, and efficacious by virtue of their greater closeness to their husbands (see Chapters Two and Three). Such an orientation and intimate positionality becomes all the more important in tense situations, as my friend Demissie surmised. A young, formerly possessed man, Demissie had been cast out from his house a year before we met, due to his addiction to *khat* and alleged theft from his parents. And yet, as he told me, “If your father banishes you from home, your mother will still bring you food in secret, and she will talk to him little by little: ‘forgive my child for the sake of me’.”

To return to my previous point: in the absence of an effective mediator—or if the mediation fails, as in Abebe’s mother’s case—children are often left to deal with their frustration silently, “in the Ethiopian way,” as my friend Melat commented jokingly. Melat, also a formerly possessed young woman, missed her chance to study at a university outside Addis Ababa because her parents refused to let her move to another city. She recounted having refused to leave her room or eat for two days. During this time, she limited communications with her relatives to a bare minimum, telling them only that she had “stomach cramps” (*kurtet*)—an interpretation that they readily accepted. Her disguised protest was patently ignored by some relatives unsympathetic to her case. Others expressed some words of encouragement, suggesting that she would feel better soon, but leaving unquestioned the social foundation of her malaise and actively excluding it from the domain of explicit discourse. Transfigured into a bodily dis-ease, the intergenerational conflict was handled through the complicity of silence and intentional pretence, strategies that characterize many family interactions and amount to a means of maintaining order.

For many informants, domestic forms of self-discipline and the unanswerable nature of patriarchal authority contribute to the onset of “stress”, or *cinqet*. In Abebe’s story, *cinqet* figures as a generalized and diffuse malaise that is hard to pin down to one single aetiology and manifestation. On a few occasions, Abebe implied that this condition might be the effect of an embodied internalization of silenced conflicts. As the quarrels with his father reached a level of stasis, and the two stopped talking to each other, *cinqet* revealed a body engulfed by words that Abebe had not said and could not say: “I had many words inside but I felt scared to talk,” he explained. Moreover, *cinqet* points to his and his mothers’ frustrating failure in persuading his

father, and bodily expresses the tension between autonomous aspirations and hierarchical restrictions.

Overwhelmed by a pervading sense of powerlessness, Abebe left his house in search of a better life. When he came back, his family members did not ask many questions. His behaviour was indulged, and the reason for his escape was never discussed. Like Melat's case, the concerted and apparently lenient silence of his kin limited the possibility of dealing openly with his transgression. My informants emphasized that conflicts with hierarchical superiors are difficult to voice in an explicit fashion: "You feel shy to talk to your father so openly," said Abebe; "You do not want to risk disrespecting your father if he does not talk to you first about a problematic issue," recalled Melat. In Abebe's case, the fear of being banished from the house or being categorically refused the benefit of fatherly protection contributed to silencing open confrontations—or, at least, to keeping them sufficiently indirect so as not to represent a challenge to vertical authority.

The injunction *lik mawek*, that is, "know your place" but also "know your limits", informs various aspects of domestic life. It suggests the necessity of respecting authority; of speaking properly, or refraining from speaking when needed; and, more broadly, of accurately assessing and acknowledging the constraints of one's agentic possibilities. If a child speaks against elders inappropriately, s/he might be reprimanded with admonitions such as: "you don't know your place/limit" (*lik atawekim*); "are you not ashamed?" (*atafrem*); or "you have been seized by a demon" (*saytan yazeh*). The latter expression is commonly taken to mean "you've gone mad" but, as the story of Abebe shows, it can have a more starkly literal meaning. Trivial challenges to elders' authority are generally met with relative leniency. If the challenge is not too serious and direct, elders may pretend not to notice it, simply ignoring acts that deviate from normative conduct or dismissing them as signs of immaturity. Indeed, as we have seen in previous chapters, youngsters are expected to be turbulent, inconsiderate and "explosive". Such a conception of youth, of course, might serve equally to justify coercion and severe punishment, which are often considered necessary to mould proper moral personae.

While the ethics of "knowing one's place" are bound to generate tensions, they also allow hierarchically inferior subjects to enjoy the benefits afforded by the protection

of the head of the household. Despite the rigid idealization of roles and positions, kinship in Ethiopia is not simply given, but is made and recreated through acts of care and protection enacted in different ways by different intimate social actors (see Stasch 2009:107). Yet, as should be apparent, the paradox of intimacy is that you are more vulnerable to those who are closest to you, who care for and love you the most—or, at least, to those who are supposed to play such roles (see Geschiere 2013:xvi-xxii). As we shall see, these are some of the relational knots that exorcism unties at Shinkuro Mikael, reconfiguring social proximity and making it liveable by diffusing conflicts and rearranging domestic relationships.

The morality of the house insists on aesthetics of containment: the individual containment of emotions, grievances, and words, as well as the collective containment of conflicts and information not meant to spill beyond physical and moral domestic boundaries. My informants emphasized that the threshold between the house and the social world outside is in need of meticulous policing, as the flux of information across this boundary is fraught with the destructive potential of shame (see Chapter Four). To echo my informants, disputes and transgressions should be “kept in the house” so as to not expose the family to external gossip. Clearly, such statements reflect more an ideological formulation of appropriate practice than they capture the everyday reality of neighbourliness. Indeed, there exists a widespread sense that certain facts cannot be fully hidden or hidden forever—especially in crowded neighbourhoods such as Abebe’s, where, as he lamented, “walls are thin” and “doors always open.” In such a setting, the fear of “shame” (*hifret*) and “public derision” (*messakiya*) represents a constant concern for families. What is more, to recall an observation made in the previous chapter, shame is understood to be socially contagious. If a family member commits theft, his family will be automatically labelled as “the family of the thief” (*ye leba betesab*), an expression that also indicates that this is “a family of thieves.” The magnitude of fears surrounding shame and its contagious propensities was vividly conveyed by my friend Seyoum: “Shame is the curse of any Ethiopian, who fears the eye of the neighbour more than the eye of the federal police, the judgment of man more than that of the Creator. We are scared to shame ourselves and to be shamed by others all the time”.

Of course, there are legitimate avenues for voicing severe conflictual issues among family members. The paradigmatic example is that of the female-dominated space of

coffee ceremony gatherings. Here, women might complain about their physically abusive husbands, and seek support and advice. “Drinking coffee is how they [women] digest their lives,” said Melat. Nevertheless, if a woman’s complaints are too persistent or too revealing of aspects of the conjugal bond that are supposed to be guarded from external assessments, negative judgment is likely to fall on the verbally incontinent wife rather than the abusive husband alone. Complaints should be voiced prudently, as they too are subjected to disciplines of containment. One’s husband can be criticized in specific social arenas, and yet, to put it in Melat’s words, “His reputation cannot be totally destroyed and the family cannot be fully shamed.” Even in contexts where problems can be shared, people are confronted with the delicate task of balancing sharing with concealment.

These apprehensions about containment resonate with the contagious shameful potential attributed to the spilling out of bodily substances, as described in the previous chapters. Whether it is generated by a verbal or a physical lack of containment, shame inescapably evokes the imagery of leaking and boundary transgression. In a sense, as I will show towards the end of this chapter, leaking houses and leaking bodies are similar sets of problems. By contrast, in this next section, I wish to highlight how “incontinent” forms of communication—specifically, trance speech—can be endowed with positive, even therapeutic, valences in places like Shinkuro Mikael. Without the intervention of baroque and unrestrained speakers like demons—who are not subjected to the social code of shame, by virtue of their categorical inhumanity—the silences and suffering created within domestic spaces often cannot be productively articulated and addressed. Interactions taking place in the liminal space of Shinkuro Mikael, a place far from the house and its specific rules, allow people to speak beyond the usual constraints of discourse.

4. Witnessing, the persuasive aesthetic of trance, and the movements of kinship

As Janice Boddy notes, “When discussing the therapeutics of trance, its potential effect on an unentranced audience is rarely considered” (1988:22). In this section, I explore the relationships between the entranced person and the various people who witness his or her trance events. The fact that the witnesses of Abebe’s first trance

episode were strangers is significant.⁴¹ In the initial phases of this exorcism, strangers were perceived as the inverse of neighbours. The judgmental gaze of the latter is greatly feared by vulnerable and confused people like Abebe. By contrast, strangers reported to Abebe what the demon speaking through him said while he was in trance, far from the fears of indiscretion on the part of those who knew him well. Abebe could then convey to his mother Michael's insistence that she should join him on in Shinkuro Mikael in the most discrete manner upon returning home. As Abebe reflected in retrospect:

You are very scared. Those who come to Shinkuro Mikael listen to what you say when you are seized by the demon without shaming you. [...] I didn't know much about my situation at that time and I was scared of the gossip of neighbours. What would they say of me? Of my family? Had I not shamed them enough with my behaviour? Instead the man and woman who were there when I entered the *s'ebel* pool just reported Michael's message to me, blessed me and encouraged me to be strong [...] Then they left and only said 'go tell your mother, Michael wants to save you'. I replied only 'Amen' and went quickly to my mother and talked behind closed doors.

Ultimately, it is thanks to these unknown witnesses that the process that led to the movement of Abebe's kin to the healing site was triggered. Below, I shall describe the peculiarities of these and other forms of witnessing, and their significance in terms of the unfolding of the exorcistic process and the reconfiguration of kinship dynamics.

Witnessing as validation and dissemination

When possessed people enter *s'ebel* pools for the first time, they start screaming. A demonic voice eclipses the human one in all of its raw violence, speaking of its pain under the power of the angel and narrating the story and misfortunes of the possessed. The story the demons tell is drenched in resentment. Demons disclose their innate hate for humanity and speak of their regret for having been revealed by Michael. Theirs are credible stories; the pain inflicted by the inquisitorial agency of the angel guarantees the veracity of the tale produced by creatures who are otherwise notoriously prone to lying. Theirs are stories that people who witness trance events are supposed to listen to, and carefully. The capacity of this unruly voice to recruit a committed audience relies on the fact that the injunction to listen and report the content of demonic speech to the demon's host—who typically has no memory of what was said while in trance—

⁴¹ Conversations with Koreen Reece, who drew my attention to the contrast between kin and strangers in my ethnography, were key to elaborating this point.

is construed as a religious obligation of the utmost ethical relevance. Listening as a form of witnessing is both a duty and the *sine qua non* of the progress of exorcism.

In this context, listening is a compassionate act also in that it involves a literal *cum patior*, a suffering with. Indeed, people who witness trance claim to be viscerally affected by the horrific spectacle of possession, and convey their pain through a number of verbal expressions. They comment on the aesthetic qualities of the agitated body of the possessed with statements of pity such as “in the name of the father” (*besimehab*), “poor thing” (*meskin*), or *weyne!*, an exclamation that suggests both amazement, worry, and pain. The audience solemnly appeals to a multitude of celestial beings invoked as advocates for the Christian body when it is usurped by unclean spirits. These interjections punctuate the tale of the demon, conferring a peculiar contrapuntal rhythm upon it. As the demon narrates how it intruded into the life of its victim through malice and deceit, witnesses of trance might directly address the spirit by asking for clarifications, commenting on the evilness of its actions, or even reminding it of the inescapability of divine victory. The acoustic interplay between the spirit and its audience socially ratifies the truthfulness of demonic speech, and confirms its capacity to reach people who react to its revelations earnestly and sympathetically (cf. Seremetakis 1990).

Through the obscene voice of a vexing spirit, the cases of people like Abebe—who suffered because of his inability to elicit meaningful responses within the domestic setting—are presented to other listeners, and opened up to discussion and intervention. Members of the audience might engage in brief discussions among themselves, in order to isolate the portions of the verbose and often incoherent demonic speech that they deem worth reporting to the possessed when s/he emerges from trance. Witnesses, then, are not simply relegated to passive receptivity, but actively participate in shaping the official narrative of possession, constructing and validating the very version of the events that, as in the case of Abebe, will be brought to the attention of the possessed person’s kin (cf. Irvine 1982).

Crucially, this witnessing is not simply predicated upon forms of cognizant evaluation, but it is also a profoundly visceral experience. The expression of the audience is grave, concerned, almost solemn, marking the demonic performance as an event in need of the most careful consideration. People bring their hands to their faces, dig forcefully

into the skin of their cheeks with their nails, plant their fingers firmly in the dark soil moistened by holy water, cover their mouths in scandalized astonishment, or raise their eyes to the sky as if they are seeking a divine sign. Some people beat their chests with open palms in a rhythm reminiscent of acts of mourning. Tears often accompany the acts of seeing, hearing, and responding. The social validation of demonic tales afforded by acts of witnessing is, thus, sustained through specific corporeal iconographies, and stylized, embodied reflexes, which add to the urgency with which people are invited to act in the interest of the possessed. These incarnated indexes of receptivity and sympathy theatrically testify to the successful dissemination of the demonic voice, and the angelic messages it might mediate.

As Nadia Seremetakis notes for Greek funeral lamentations, “the linguistic, acoustic, and corporeal” interplay between soloist and chorus “is [...] crucial to the performance” of the soloist, and “lament singers feel they cannot attain the proper emotional intensity and reality outside the antiphonic structure and thus the ceremony itself” (1990:490). Seremetakis understands antiphony as a process of listening, responding, and embodying the pain of the other speaker. As she writes, “The prefix ‘anti’ not only refers to opposition and antagonism but also implies ‘in place of’, equivalence, reciprocity, and face to face” (ibid.:492). The antiphonic circuit of trance is equally fundamental to the predicament of the possessed, as without an assembly of bodily and emotionally attuned witnesses disposed to compassionate listening, the social efficacy of trance performances would be lost. In Abebe’s case, trance would fail to compel acknowledgment and mobilize support if the witnesses of his first trance had not reported to him that he should come back to Shinkuro Mikael with his kin on Michael’s day—an invitation that already contained the seed of cure.

The demon eventually manifested itself through Abebe’s mother, too. Over the course of a few months, as mother and son entered into trance at different moments, each acted as the witness of their entranced relative, reporting what the demon said. This web of mediated communications allowed for a cumulative process of further elaborating and consolidating a shared narrative about the events preceding Abebe’s visit to the shrine. Through this speaking, listening, and reporting, murky passages in the entanglements of family life were illuminated. Family members thus came to learn about themselves and the intricate relationships binding them through a common demonic other. As Abebe said, “My mother learned about many of my past misdeeds

I had no memory of. And when I saw her possessed I also understood... I thought: ‘She came here to suffer so much because of the love she has for us. She would do anything for her family’.” His mother similarly commented: “I understood the ways in which this spirit was attacking the house only by hearing directly from it. Also, I came to realize that my son has a kind heart but has been played like a toy by the devil, like all of us.”

Crucially, the triadic structure of witnessing—comprising a demonic agent, a human medium, and an unentranced witness—helps demarcate distinctions between demon and host. With reference to possession in Mayotte, Michael Lambek notes:

As well as sustaining an exchange relationship with an outside intermediary, another important aspect of the communication triad is that it maintains the separation between host and spirit. Were host and spirit to regularly communicate directly between each other, their distinctiveness would be broken down. By delivering its messages through a third party, the spirit attempts to shield the host from being implicated as an accessory to the generation of spirits’ messages. To the degree that such separation between host and spirit is maintained, the spirit cannot only say things to the house, but can say and do things that would be impossible or unthinkable for the host to say and do. (Lambek 1980:322; see also Lambek 1988)

Similarly, in our context, the emergence of a demonic voice during trance safeguarded the host from the collapse of boundaries between demonic and human personae by recruiting a third human party as witness. Indeed, when alone and far from Shinkuro Mikael, Abebe was left to wonder: “Is this my thought? Or does it come from a demon? What is this voice I hear in my head saying ‘I should...’? The demon doesn’t say ‘you should kill yourself’ but ‘I shall kill myself’.” The mediated communication of trance helped Abebe to differentiate his thoughts from those instilled by a nebulous demonic agency refusing to reclaim its independent voice outside the sacred site. Abebe noted that this discernment helped generate speculative conversations with his kin about how they could detect and oppose the subtle, malevolent agency secretly unravelling the threads of their relations:

We sat with my mother and discussed for long time. She is fast [intelligent] and gave me many advices: ‘Don’t listen to that thought, it’s the devil!’ And she said that we should pray God together to give us strength and save us. And she was right... And then we talked about our problems calmly with words of love.

As I illustrate in the next section, in sites like Shinkuro Mikael, these intimate conversations are framed in terms of a cosmology of spiritual embattlement, revealing the deep entwinement of the realm of the house and that of various non-human forces

populating the Orthodox cosmos. Put otherwise, the drama of possession is at once an intimate and a cosmic one.

Witnessing the cosmos, entering the battle

The painful cries of demons constitute the contrastive ground against which the inquisitorial agency of invisible cosmic actors—such as the archangel Michael—becomes readily visible. While Michael is never to be directly heard, demonic utterances in response to his inaudible questions attest to the angel's violence against demons—"Yes, we are three and your sword [Michael's sword] is upon us"; "We seized him [the possessed individual] in the market and now we are burning"—and the angel's benevolence toward humanity—"Michael said that he rose to succour the son of Adam"; "Don't worry, Michael is saying that he seized us." In other words, demons provide answers to questions that spectators of a trance cannot hear, but whose content they can infer—thus demonstrating Michael's agency, power, and will to them.

By giving palpable evidence of unseen divine forces at work, the cries of demons graphically dramatize the Orthodox cosmic hierarchy in a convincing and reassuring manner. However terrifying and unruly demonic forces might initially appear, exorcism demonstrates that they, too, are ultimately answerable to a superior divine authority. This answerability is vividly expressed in demonic statements I heard myself: "We have no right over him [the host]. Michael has claimed him as his"; or "We are usurpers and criminals. But Michael is above us and we must obey." This visibility of angelic and divine will⁴² against the background of the demonic is consistent with distinctive notions of Ethiopian Orthodox theodicy. As Messay Kebede notes:

God's creation of the world was inspired neither by the need to please human beings nor to harm them. All created things [...] are instruments of the [...] self-assertion of God. [...] This triumph presupposes and posits evil so that the world is like a stage where the tendency to self-sufficiency and arrogance rises constantly against the will of the Creator. [...] So, evil is a necessary actor in this divine drama and, as such, part of good. Just as a novelist creates evil characters in order to highlight the triumph of the hero in the end, so too God creates good and evil for the purpose of asserting His will. (Messay 1999:205)

⁴² My informants do not always distinguish neatly between divine and angelic will, as angels are considered faithful executors of God's commands.

However, Messay adds, “there is a fundamental duality in the nature of God”; although “everything that happens reflects His active will [...] this will is not transparent,” remaining in the last instance clouded in inscrutable mystery (1999:182-183). As Abebe’s mother suggested, demons allow for a more direct perception of at least some aspects of divine will:

What they [demons] said and what their cries showed me is that God wants to save you. Nobody can know what God thinks. But we were given many signs that he had a plan for us and this is different from the demons’ plan. Our Lord gives you time to come back to Him, He shows you many bad things and you understand that life far from Him is meaningless misery.

As people witness this confrontation between opposed powers, they come to appreciate the relevance of these powers to their own suffering. “Seeing” possession, in this sense, is not characterized by an unimpassioned spectator’s point of view: people do not just witness a battle, they are often forcefully drawn into it, called to take part in this war; and their very bodies become battlefields—as do their families.

Notably, in observing the trance of familiar others, witnesses of trance crisis often recognize themselves in the disfigured, suffering face of the possessed. The witnesses become aware that, in looking at bodies invaded by a malevolent entity, they are looking at a demon who might at any moment emerge within themselves. Indeed, it is not uncommon for witnesses of the violent spectacle of trance to slip into the condition of the possessed person, since feeling the pain of a given demonic host might awaken a demon in the witness. This was the case for Abebe’s mother, who claimed to have fallen into trance when she was overtaken by the sight of the body of her son usurped by an alien evil. These forms of vicarious suffering—the mirroring of others’ conditions in one’s body (cf. Werbner 2011) and the possession of the witness—bespeak porous forms of personhood, open to the intersubjective circulation of pain and spirits; and they mark the position of the witness as an unstable and dangerous one. In a sense, the witness often risks becoming the witnessed.

The vivid demonstration of angelic authority in exorcist processes contributes to creating a safe space, where the past actions of possessed people like Abebe and his kin can be made visible, and where kin can engage in forms of communication implicating both them and demonic others. In the next section, I elaborate how such conditions enable productive recalibrations and reconfigurations of kin relationships—and the vulnerability, intimacy, and authority embedded therein.

5. Intimacy, vulnerability, and the ambivalence of relations

As we have seen, Abebe's mother felt compelled to visit Shinkuro Mikael by Michael's direct invitation, made through a demon. Through this interpellation, she and her children became actors in a spiritual drama that affected the entire domestic group. The fact that the spirit was a *zar* explained its deep entanglement with mother and son. *Zar* spirits are the protagonists of well-documented adorcistic cults where—after an initial confrontation with human hosts, marked by sickness and misfortune—they can be cajoled into becoming benevolent protectors of the entire kin group, in which they might possess different members simultaneously (see Aspen 2011; Leiris 1988; cf. Boddy 1993). In Shinkuro Mikael, such spirits are unambiguously assimilated to the category of the demonic, and therefore deemed in need of expulsion. This interpretation notwithstanding, given that the *zar* spirit indexes the relational character of affliction, it equally signals to family members that a cure requires elaborate manipulation of their mutual relationships. Below, I focus on how kin interact at the sacred site, and how they work through the intricacies of their relationships to change their situations at home. Echoing an observation made earlier, I will illustrate that spirits' intervention in familial affairs does not provide linear solutions, nor engender wholly new types of relationships, so much as it thickens already existing relationships by nourishing their affective and moral density (see Boddy 1989:353; Masquelier 2011:177).

Spirits that divide and unite

Abebe's demon was the root of all the evils dividing the household. The process of exorcism—and more specifically, the fact that both mother and son became possessed by the same spirit—emphasized and condensed the dangerous aspects of domestic relations. Though undesired, these risks were nevertheless crucial means of creating cohesion amongst kin. To paraphrase Lambek, the *zar* served as a “sign of the unity, distinctiveness, and continuity of the family”, and spoke “with the voice of someone who has an enduring association” with it (Lambek 2003:47). Notably, the spirit's capacity to index and concretize cohesion did not only rely on rhetoric and semantic elements of entranced speech. Rather, being possessed by the same spirit “is a statement of relationship, a means of relating [...] but indirectly, less through words or overt acts of allegiance than through embodied experience” (Boddy 1993:33). In

Shinkuro Mikael, kin relationships are also corporeal ones: not just relationships *between* people but lived out *within* them. Possession thus renders compelling and intelligible the fact that kin “share a mutual history,” and that “it is [...] because of this history that they become possessed as they do” (ibid.:32). These realizations, I suggest, produce a climate of willingness to mend the relational wounds that led Abebe to visit Shinkuro Mikael in the first place. Let me return to the positive interaction between Abebe and his mother briefly sketched in the earlier sections to corroborate this point.

Watching his mother speak with an “other”, vitriolic voice, which spewed spite against the family and the church, Abebe came to realize the dangerousness of the evil dwelling within him. He met it face to face. The same applies for his mother, who said, “I saw the demon seizing him and I understood why Abebe created all these problems to the family. I understood that it was the same spirit I had inside and I thought we should do something to stop it.” Family members, as I suggested, came to learn about themselves and the intricate relationships binding them through a common demonic other. As the mother continued:

What evil fell on us! We should save our family before we are destroyed. So I told Abebe not to be afraid, that I was not angry at him. I told my other children that they had to listen to Abebe with patience and help him with everything. The devil wants to divide people, but God likes family unity (*hebreten*). We talked about our problems, but I said to them, “Don’t be resentful, leave this to God. It was not him [Abebe]. Pray for your brother. Pray for me.”

Much as Lambek notes for the association of spirits and families in Mayotte, exorcism enabled family members to “discuss domestic matters in a context that encourages openness, careful reflection, and reasoned mutual compromise” (1980:328). Furthermore, the priests from whom family members sought advice reminded them that, for God to show His mercy, kin must be merciful to each other—adding urgency and importance to their interactions, so long as they were geared towards reinforcing the cohesiveness of the domestic unit.

Shinkuro Mikael produces and renders visible what we could term demonic kinship. Specifically, conflictual and oppressive aspects of kin relations are personified in the figure of the demon, who dramatically exacerbates them. By contrast, and more importantly, exorcism casts into sharp visibility the kin who care for the possessed, magnifying the nurturing aspects of their relationships against the background of

divisive, demonic evil. In this setting, quotidian acts of care—such as cooking for and feeding others, as well mutual encouragement and forgiveness—come to mark the highest forms of religious of action, and can be appreciated as invaluable “gifts from God,” in the words of Abebe. Exorcism brings to the fore the soothing potential of intimacy, as well as its coercive and violent sides; yet exorcism feeds the former, and largely downplays the latter, as the ritual process progresses.

As in other ethnographic contexts, spirit possession “adds a new dimension to existing relationships rather than compensating for their loss” (Boddy 1993:31). Abebe, like many other possessed people, did not seek an alternative to his troubled kin relations in the community of sufferers living at Shinkuro Mikael, nor did he consider breaking ties with his kin as possible or necessary in terms of the attainment of a cure (cf. Hermann 2009, 2010). Rather, the therapeutic power of exorcism obtains from its capacity to move the household itself, as it were, into a new therapeutic space, leaving room for domestic relationships to be productively and subtly modified (see Corin 1998; Pype 2011). In retrospect, Abebe’s mother commented:

Now he [Abebe] tells me that without the love of your family life is like exile (*siddet*). You have to put a lot effort into making this love grow because nothing can substitute it; God will never give you another mother and another father. Going there [Shinkuro Mikael] we saw that without loving each other we would be like Satan’s toys. Everybody knows that you should respect your father and mother, but until you see the love of God like this [like in Shinkuro Mikael] you do not know what this really means. Now we have the [kind of] peace we never had in our life [...] and if there is love the house is blessed. We had to go there for him [Abebe] to come back [to the house] healed.

Of course, the relative re-harmonization of familial relations could never have been achieved without a change in the relationship of Abebe’s mother with her husband, as well. Recall that part of the impasse was due to the Abebe’s father’s unwillingness to forgive and support his son, despite the repeated pleas of his wife. Allegedly, Abebe’s father never visited the shrine, remaining at home while his wife and children underwent the same ritual routines as Abebe. Abebe’s father would receive regular visits from his wife and children—except Abebe, who never left the site. They reported on Abebe’s progress, and asked for financial help in buying food, affording transport, and renting the hut where they all lived in Shikuro Mikael.⁴³ The father obliged all of

⁴³ Abebe’s older brother remarked that his father was the bread winner of the family, and he could help his kin more effectively from home. However, the fact that the *zar* spirit was inherited through matrilineal lines may also have provided a justification for the father’s absence.

these requests without resistance. But what provoked Abebe's authoritarian father to make such generous and unconditional concessions?

With reference to the Sudanese *zar* cult, Boddy observes that the fact that a spirit may possess different consanguineal female members of a family provides "threads of coherence" in the complex nets of kin relations, foregrounding matrilineal continuity as an "embodied counterpoint" to patriarchal authority (1993:33). In Ethiopia, a different articulation of comparable embodied counterpoints emerges. Exorcism instantiated a renewed affective and bodily cohesion between mother and son, who were possessed by the same alien force, which provided visible evidence of the depth of their essential connection. Beyond the bodily connectedness of mother and son, exorcism also reinforced the relationship between the mother and the rest of her children, who now became aware of the shared nature of the problem and keen witnesses of its seriousness. Drawing on the support of her offspring, during her visits to her husband, Abebe's mother could speak with a renewed persuasive force; she now spoke for the rest of the family, who sided strongly with her.

Unlike classic functionalist readings of similar situations, the restoration of the mother's mediatory faculty was not dependent on her capacity to exact redress through expressing demands with the authoritative voice of a spiritual other (cf. Lewis 1966). Rather, the joint supplication of kin who went through and witnessed the hardships of exorcism together clarified Abebe's father's role: had he further refused any concessions to them, he would have drawn the negative moral judgment of neighbours and other kin upon himself. As Abebe's mother commented, "How can one not care for his kin who are seized by spirits? How can he not have mercy for the horse [host] of a *zar* (*ye zar feres*)? People will think that he is cruel if all his family has seen this suffering and he ignores their claim." Furthermore, direct divine and angelic intervention into the familial situation forced the father to confront nothing less than God's will; and, as it is axiomatically known, arguing with God is likely to invite disastrous consequences. As Abebe clarified, "My father is a God-fearing man. He said that God wanted to save the family and that he could not disobey God and make him angry. We had suffered too much; God has given us a big chance."

In her renewed efforts at mediation, Abebe's mother enacted a peculiar modality of power: a sort of supplication in front of authority, which invokes much greater

authority to which she has gained access through possession and the work of care undertaken for her son. In other words, rather than being simply a “weapon of the weak,” (cf. Lewis 1966) the mother’s claims were also an invocation and a reminder of superior powers. Through this invocation, Abebe’s father was given the occasion to piously submit and to back down from his previous stance without relinquishing authority or being shamed.

While I have described exorcism as a process of revelation marked by new regimes of visibility and speakability, the ritual engenders its own forms of concealment (cf. Taussig 1999). Demons reveal hidden legacies of conflict and claim a central role in them. However, no direct challenge to fatherly authority is ever explicitly voiced, nor is the abuse of that authority ever discussed as such. These concealments allow the reintegration of possessed individuals in domestic units without hierarchical friction, as I illustrate below. Concealment and revelation are, again, crucial ways in which relations are simultaneously realigned and reasserted.

The vulnerability of relating

The therapeutic of exorcism is less preoccupied with the possessed individual *per se*, than with the multiple relationships in which he or she is embroiled. The ritual’s declared telos is the restoration of self-agency through the excision of a demon; yet, as Abebe’s case exemplifies, exorcism also works to reconfigure kin relationships, without abolishing any of the norms of deference and obedience that structure familial arrangements and critically restrain individual agency. The paradox here is that while purporting to modify the qualities of hierarchical relations of dependency and domination, exorcism also solidifies their scaffolding. In fact, in restoring some sort of balance in the family, Abebe’s mother contributed to perpetuating and enabling the hierarchical divisions and asymmetrical distribution of authority that produced the original family conflict. And yet, such a unidimensional interpretation cannot fully account for the complexity of the changes that took place in the family’s domestic arrangements—nor their socio-religious significance.

Broadly, the dramatic staging of intimate relationships in Shinkuro Mikael provides an insightful commentary on human power and vulnerability, as well as on the nature and perils of relationality. The theory of social relations implicit in the narratives of possession I collected reasserts the necessity of protectors (fathers, angels, God) in

navigating social life successfully. And yet, as I hinted earlier, one of the most important truths about vulnerability that exorcism admits—if through an oblique idiom (see Boddy 1989)—is that one is most vulnerable to protectors like fathers. With all its cross-cutting messages, the exorcism of Abebe represents less of an open challenge to paternal authority, than a subtle, plural strategy geared toward its recalibration, aiming at unlocking the latent potential for benevolent patronage—itsself a gendered expression of care—implicit in domestic asymmetries, while taming the rawest aspects of familial authority.

Let me rephrase my reading in a slightly different fashion. Through various ritual protocols, Abebe regained control over his actions and choices, as well as freedom from the burden of the demonic. But Abebe's exorcism was not simply about his autonomy. Construing the separation of demon and host as an articulation of individual agency, while acknowledging one central aspect of ritual efficacy, also discounts the fact that exorcism inspires social actors find virtue in submission and hierarchical dependency. Exorcism may encourage one's re-insertion in networks of hierarchical dependency, but not before striking a new, productive balance between deference and personal desire. This re-balancing left Abebe some room for individual manoeuvring, while allowing him to retain his role in the family structure, and the benefits that come with it in terms of paternal protection and support. Through mutual compromises, the family agreed to start a business—for which the father contributed a large sum—thus creating an employment for Abebe. He could not choose his role, but he was nevertheless able to earn his own money, while being treated more indulgently by his kin. Indeed, Abebe's mother stressed that the family expected Abebe to work in the shop for some hours every day, but tries not to “stress him out too much about it.”

Lastly, I wish to emphasize how these changes in troubled family relationships bear important implications for the relationships of family members with the divine. Abebe's story ends with the solemn acknowledgment of authority and the performance of re-submission—not just to his father, but also to the angel and God. Abebe's father was also solemnly—if circuitously—reminded of the necessity to submit to the greater authority of God, and given an opportunity to do so. Abebe stressed that during his stay on site, he confessed his sins several times in order to “say sorry to God and be closer to Him, because my sins and disobedience to my father made us far.” Abebe

deemed confession to be indispensable to the expulsion of the demon, as well as to achieving desired realignments in familial arrangements: “If God does not forgive you... Without God’s blessing there is no peace in the house, only fights and backbiting. Now that I am in peace with my father, God is closer to me.” In his narrative, one’s relationship with one’s father and one’s relationship with God are both construed in terms of transgression and forgiveness. By bridging the troubling distance from his father, Abebe succeeded in restoring his salvific proximity to the divine, and vice versa. In liminal spaces such as Shinkuro Mikael, the sphere of the worldly and the spiritual, the realm of cosmic and intimate relationships, appear particularly co-dependent and mutually actable; and realignments effected in one sphere may reflect on the other.

The exorcism of shame

In isolating an inimical agency and pluralizing affliction, *s’ebel* rituals also allowed for the exorcism of shame, as it were. We have seen how domestic conduct is subjected to severe disciplines of containment and deference, and how “behaviour out of place” (Boddy 1988; cf. Douglas 2002) is bound to engender shame. As noted, shame is endowed with contagious potential, especially in the case of “leaking” houses that fail to contain secrets, transgressions, and conflicts. Here, shame is a unifying but dangerous vulnerability of relationships—a bridging trope that links the moral and the familial.

Abebe’s kin concurred that none of his family members was to be held fully responsible for their conflicts, as guilt and blame belonged exclusively to an external agent beyond their control. While it is often proposed that demons attack individuals who deviate from the moral tenets of religion—which, here, overlap with normative domestic conduct—Abebe’s family members came to regard Abebe as the innocent victim of a spirit targeting the entire kin group. Abebe admitted that his transgressions might have empowered the vexing spirit⁴⁴; but then he also concluded that some of these same transgressions were instigated by the spirit in the first place. The productive ambiguity of possession, and its speculative theories of causation, allows people to assume and sustain the role of penitent and possessed at once. The

⁴⁴ For Abebe and his mother, undergoing confession was not meant to establish a direct causal link between their sin and their possession. Rather, they saw asking God’s forgiveness as necessary to soliciting His benevolent intervention, and as something that would weaken the demon’s power.

paradoxical logic of possession does not force the parties involved to embrace an unequivocal interpretation of events, nor of their roles in those events, as long as they accept that a single person is not fully accountable for troubles provoked and ensuing shame. In such open-ended redistributions—and partial negations—of accountability, the shame attached to individual transgressions is dissipated and diluted, and shame's contagiousness largely neutralized

In fact, once Abebe's problem was socially validated and made known as an instance of spirit possession, the arbitrating eye of the neighbourhood ceased to see a rebellious son plagued by addiction and chronic insubordination, and began to acknowledge in the shy young man a blameless victim of evil forces attacking an honourable household. Thus, in a sense, in restoring the boundedness of individual bodies, exorcism reinforced the boundedness of a household that had suffered due to its inability to contain clashes and transgressions. In the context of exorcism, social realignments are effected through corporeal ones (Boddy 1993). Exorcism, however, does not provide a permanent sealing; it points instead to the necessity to be ever warier of the micro-politics of boundary policing and maintenance. Believers undergoing exorcism gain a renewed awareness of the importance of safeguarding their bodies from the intrusion of the demonic, through more assiduous religious practice and observant cultivation of their faith. Similarly, Abebe's family is now more conscious of the dangers of unboundedness in the context of the household, and attends to its internal cohesion as well as to its intrinsically porous thresholds with greater attention, in order to preserve the relative peace the family has attained.

6. Conclusion

In this chapter I have explored the intersections between kinship, demonic possession, and exorcism. In contrast to analyses that cast the healing process taking place at *s'ebel* shrines as a popularization of monastic lifestyles, based on otherworldly orientations and a neat break from familial ties, I have demonstrated how kin ties are central to the success of exorcism. I have shown that, just as people often become possessed because of a shared family history, it is through collectively reconfiguring various familial bonds that they manage to be delivered from occult influences. This process would not be possible if exorcism did not first make a number of overlapping relationships visible, speakable and actable—relationships that involve human,

angelic, and demonic beings, as well as God Himself. In this sense, exorcism is an intimate and cosmic drama all at once.

Thomas Csordas's study of Catholic charismatic movements in New England analyses forms of exorcism in which ritual labour loosens and refabricates selves through therapeutic repertoires heavily influenced by American folk psychology. His work provides material for an apt comparison, as the notions of personhood and relationality embedded in his ethnography are deeply steeped in the paradigm of "western individualism". Both Catholic Charismatics and Ethiopian Orthodox Christians are concerned with the harmful influence of human and demonic others—and of demonic others through human others—in their lives and bodies. The therapeutics of Catholic Charismatics are chiefly preoccupied with the harmful experiences of a "discrete and [...] emotionally injured self"—parental abuse being a recurrent example—as well as with "its autobiography, its levels of consciousness, [...] and psychotherapy" (Csordas 1994:187). In Abebe's case demonstrates, in Shinkuro Mikael possessed individuals do not address their suffering through the gradual exfoliation of their levels of consciousness. The harm produced by demonic forces through intimate others (and vice versa) is not understood in terms of individualized psychological damage, but in terms of communal affect, of vulnerability and suffering shared across family members and lingering in their fraught, ambivalent relatedness. The body of the possessed—as well as that of his kin—emerges as a relational knot in a complex embroidery of connections, binding together humans and non-human powers, on which every family member has to act for exorcism to bring about its purported results.

The contrast between the two forms of exorcism appears sharper if we consider the "healing of memories," a prominent feature of the rituals examined by Csordas. This practice is animated by the imperative to discover one's "true self"—a "sacred self" where God can be intimately experienced as soothing company. In this context, "Both repressed and conscious memories are regarded as significant constituents of the 'self'" (1994:110). Healing rituals are "premised on the folk psychodynamic model of bringing unconscious content into awareness" (ibid.:54). The intimate human other responsible for the suffering of the afflicted person appears as the psychological trace of a harmful relationship, sedimented in the depths of the sufferer's unconscious. The main telos of ritual healing is not recomposing problematic relations with harmful others. The afflicted person is typically invited to forgive those who harmed him or

her, and change his or her disposition towards them, but not necessarily to sustain a relationship with them. Catholic Charismatics seek “reconciliation with the alterity of the self” (Cosrda 1994:132), a “liberation from the burden they find within themselves, the burden of the internalized other” (Werbner 2011:187).

Echoing Boddy, in Shinkuro Mikael, “unlike Western psychotherapy, which encourages the patient to accept and integrate previously dissociated feelings as part of the self,” exorcism works by convincing the possessed person to recognize spirits as quintessentially undesired non-selves (1988:18). As Abebe’s case exemplifies, rather than being geared towards the unveiling of a true self and its unseen depths, exorcism reveals and concretises unseen demonic forces, and demands collective action on relations between kin to expel them. Here, reconciliation does not amount to self-forgiveness, or solely to changes in the afflicted individual’s dispositions towards others. Instead, the reconciliatory mechanics of exorcism necessitate a shift in dispositions and attitudes on behalf of the possessed person’s intimate others as well. To put it simply: if you have an issue with your father or your mother, you do not change yourself, but your mutual relationships.

For Catholic Charismatics, the internalized burden of fraught relationships is often at the root of an acute sense of guilt felt by many people who seek healing. Feelings of guilt are overcome through intimate and pacifying encounters with all-loving God in the space one’s interiority. By contrast, exorcism in Shinkuro Mikael does not detect and unearth individual guilt (cf. Csordas 1994). It rather engenders a diffusion and partial disavowal of responsibility; it recasts accountability in an ironic and oblique fashion, neutralizing the unruly social force of shame and its contagiousness. Such a process, as we have seen, facilitates the reinsertion and reintegration of possessed individuals in relational domestic settings, and minimizes hierarchical friction. Critically, far from being a purely soothing force, divine power—mediated by the angel—is asserted in a theatrical demonstration of violent lordship, demanding extreme submission from believers and demons alike. The sense of security that exorcism brings about derives primarily from this graphic demonstration of the superiority of a God that punishes and rewards according to His creatures’ capacity and willingness to surrender to His will—a role that, as we have seen, nobody can refuse, not even Abebe’s proud father.

Charismatic enactments of the “sacred self” are meant to produce an enduring sense of peace in troubled minds and bodies, “both released through resignation to one’s lot, and the sharing of a slice of heaven as the reward for devotion” (Csordas 1994:251). Exorcism in Shinkuro Mikael constitutes instead an “explicit thematisation of ongoing vulnerability” (Klaits 2009:150). In many ways, exorcism reveals that the challenges of intimacy cannot be definitively overcome, but that the very structures that produce them can be navigated and inhabited more productively. Exorcism does not just make relationships visible; it makes relationality, vulnerability, and dependence meaningful. Its outcome is not a bounded, autonomous person, but one who is more aware of the perils that the management of porous individual and domestic boundaries entail. In the next chapter, I will illustrate how similar concerns with boundaries and possession transcend the realm of the house to inform processes affecting the Ethiopian territory and the national Orthodox community at large.

CHAPTER VI:
A THEATRE OF DEMONS:
FOREIGN SPIRITS AND THE EXORCISM OF THE BODY OF ORTHODOXY

1. Introduction

A voice resounded in the yard of Istifanos church, in the heart of Addis Abeba. Broadcast by loudspeakers, the voice could be heard far beyond the church walls. “Ethiopia is under attack,” said the priest, holding a microphone and perched on a wooden stage in the middle of a crowd of hundreds of people. The enemy is a cunning one, invisible to human eyes. It attacks the population of the country in a number of unexpected ways. Yet the enemy is an old one; it is the same since the time of Adam and Eve. Today it appears in new forms, speaking with new and more seductive voices, and generating new kind of problems. “Ethiopia is a battlefield,” the priest declared—insinuating that the church of Istifanos is among the principal arenas of this battle.

The priest was Mihimir Girma⁴⁵, an exorcist who, at the time, had been performing mass exorcisms for at least a decade. During my fieldwork and the writing of this dissertation, his popularity was at its peak, thanks to his capacity to reach multiple audiences: the people in the church; those watching the VCDs of his exorcisms, which could be purchased on site and across the country; and Ethiopians abroad who followed him on YouTube. His was a voice that reached far. Unique in performing such large-scale rituals, the entirely new kind of spirits⁴⁶ he exorcized were equally peculiar: Protestant spirits, Buddhist spirits, diasporic spirits, and so forth. These were understood as foreign spirits, with modern cultural traits that mirrored the habits and tastes of modern Ethiopians—spirits that attack Ethiopia by insidiously undermining the ancient faith of its Orthodox population.

⁴⁵ The title “Mihimir” refers generically to any religious teacher, whether ordained or not.

⁴⁶ With the exception of the Holy Spirit, every spirit is considered by the exorcist to be demonic. The terms “spirit” (*menfes*) and “demon” (*aganint* or *saytan*) are used interchangeably in Istifanos, and I use them the same way in the text.

The thickset priest, with a wide face and handsome features, remained an enigmatic figure, and little was known about his private life and past. Certainly, he was not immune from rumours. Excessive concentration of religious charisma in a single individual is highly suspicious to Orthodox Christians. Some people said he commanded demons so effectively because he himself was possessed by a powerful one. Occasional attendants of Istifanos found the new categories of spirits perplexing, and even doubted the veracity of other people's trances. Above all, people felt puzzled by the ritual tools that the exorcist utilized—microphones, loudspeakers, electric holy water pumps, cameras—especially given his stern condemnation of the forces of modernity corroding the ethical fibre of the country. For his detractors, Mihimir Girma's exquisitely modern ritual repertoire also revealed a dangerous likeness to the practices of Protestants, a group that the exorcist openly opposed.

Exorcisms took place at Istifanos two or three times a week. Every week, the same demonic drama was reproduced in a standardized format. The ritual was known as the "program." It started with a sermon after the mass—which was performed inside the church by local priests, and never by the exorcist. In the exorcist's sermons, biblical passages were analysed in the light of contemporary Ethiopian society, its history, and the role of evil spirits in both. The large crowd, comprised of people afflicted by all sorts of ailments and spirits, curious visitors, and adamant followers of the exorcist, would listen silently. Some possessed individuals came to Istifanos at their own initiative in the hopes of finding a cure; others were brought by their kin or friends, sometimes with their hands and feet tied together in order to prevent them from harming others or themselves. Some people took notes. From time to time, a possessed person would shout insults towards the exorcist. The possessed person would be disciplined quickly by Mihimir Girma's helpers, a group of men wearing lab coats with a cross sewn on them, who violently beat the disturber with a heavy wooden rosary known as *mekutaria*. It is the demon who feels the pain, they said, not the human host.

After the sermon, the exorcist would call various spirits by their name from the stage. The catalogue was vast. The spirits responded to this interpellation with shouts and violent spasms. Possessed people would clamber towards and make breaks for the stage, pushing against the crowd. New people fell into trance: women bit their hair, other possessed people yelled blasphemies, and fights were not uncommon. The

helpers would be busier than ever, distributing whippings in the attempt to maintain a semblance of order in the midst of demonic chaos. A few possessed individuals would be invited on stage, and others would be refused and made to sit back in the crowd, rubbing shoulders with a multitude of suffering, twitching, agitated bodies.

The exorcist then interrogated the spirits with a microphone. Unlike traditional exorcisms, the ensuing conversations were lengthy and thorough. He grabbed the possessed individuals by their clothes, made them kneel, and hit their foreheads with the palm of his heavy hand. He whipped them repeatedly with his *mekutaria*, till the spirits revealed their motives and plans through the mouth of their human hosts. At times, the kin of possessed people were invited on stage clarify the circumstances of possession; sometime they too fell into trance, and entire families were exorcised. Spirits were asked what they think of Orthodox symbols, what they wish for Ethiopia, and how they operate in contemporary society. These interactions were suspended between comedy and tragedy; the audience would laugh at one moment and retreat in religious dismay at another. Once the exorcist was done with his interrogation, he made the spirits swear to leave their hosts “in the name of Mary,” “in the name of the Trinity,” “in the name of Jesus,” “in the name of Saint Tekla Haymanot.” The possessed person was then finally commanded to perform seven genuflections (*sigdet*). Demons swore that they would be “tied in hell.” The host was then free. He or she would usually collapse on the ground for a moment.

The formerly possessed person would appear confused, cry profusely, and reach for the knees of the exorcist in order to kiss them. They would bow in front of the big posters of various saints hanging at the back of the stage. People emerging from trance provided emotionally dense public testimony about past moral transgressions, as well as about the joys of liberation. The exorcist severely admonished them not to sin again, and pronounced benevolent encouragements to live a more pious life.

After the conspicuous solicitation of donations, which were collected in umbrellas passed around the crowd, the exorcist would drench the audience with *s’ebel* (holy water) through an electric water pump emitting a violent jet. He walked among the crowd in havoc, and targeted individuals who appeared particularly aggressive or keen to avoid the water, including the disoriented anthropologist. The confusion was barely manageable; the loud cries of demons covered all other sounds, and many possessed

people needed to be physically restrained. Mihimir Girma would then disappear discretely from the frenzy of these vehement, growling bodies, escorted by his helpers.

* * *

In this chapter, I examine this new form of exorcism, focusing less on individual experiences of possession than on the implications of exorcism in terms of the wider Orthodox community. I am most interested in new categories of spirits previously unknown to the Ethiopian public. The constant refrain at Istifanos is, “Modern spirits are like modern people”. The polyphonic discourse of possession—to which spirits, hosts, audience, and exorcist contribute, weaving together their voices and acts—is at once an unyielding critique of the foreign forces incarnated by new, modern spirits, as well as of the excessive openness of Ethiopian society to such forces. This openness is exemplified by the possessed bodies of those Ethiopians who seek models of self-making in the lures of modernization—models the exorcist deems incompatible with, and often antagonistic to, the ancient history of Orthodox faith⁴⁷. My discussion builds on themes of permeability, boundedness, and purity explored in previous chapters with regards to the body, the church, and the household, in order to illustrate how the same themes constitute major concerns and dangers on a national scale. Mary Douglas has famously claimed that:

The body is a model which can stand for any bounded system. Its boundaries can represent any boundaries which are threatened or precarious. [...] The functions of its different parts and their relations afford a source of symbols for other complex structures. We cannot possibly interpret rituals concerning excreta, breast milk, saliva and the rest unless we are prepared to see in the body the symbol of society, and to see the powers and dangers credited to social structure reproduced in the same human body. (Douglas 2002:142)

While I take my cue from this seminal insight, I want to challenge some of its “representational” implications, and to argue that possession is not merely symbolic of social dis-order, but viscerally constitutive of it. Possession does not signify the uncertainties of modernity, but “operates as part and parcel of modernity itself” (Moore & Sanders 2001:11; see Beherend & Luig 1999; Comaroff & Comaroff 1993; Geschiere 1997). I argue that, in a context where spirits resemble their hosts, by re-establishing the boundaries of the body of a specific individual through the excision

⁴⁷ My use of the word “modernity” and its cognate terms maps on the local concept of *zemenawinet* (see Introduction and Chapter 1). In the context of Istifanos, *zemenawinet* bears mostly negative associations with ideas, goods, values, and practices imported from abroad and responsible for the moral corruption of Ethiopian society. In the exorcist’s discourse, “modernity” and “foreignness” are often conflated.

of a demonic intruder, Mihimir Girma attends to the porous boundaries of the community of Ethiopian Orthodox believers at large. Attempts to reassert control over the boundaries of the supra-individual “body of the Orthodoxy,” as it were, also rely on the moral evaluation of objects, behaviours, and ideas perceived as modern, and their subordination to the framework of Orthodoxy and its purposes. I suggest that through complex, open-ended engagements with modern spirits, the modern vices they stand for, and the modern people who lend them material form, Mihimir Girma sketches a tentative profile of what an Orthodox modernity could and should look like.

2. From generation to generation: an evolutionary theory of spirits and humans

Mihimir Girma and the spirits he exorcised both have a lot to say about this generation’s (*tewlid*) acute vulnerability to the intrusion of spirits.

Spirit [henceforth “S”]: We never forced anyone. They come voluntarily. In the end, you all come willingly. We never forced you. In particular, we do not force those of you between age fifteen and twenty-eight.

Mihimir Girma [henceforth “MG”]: They all come?

S: They want to change. The youth read books these days.

MG: Why can’t they read religious books?

S: They despise them.

MG: They do not like them?

S: The church... They even feel shy to go to church.

MG: Do you know what causes this?

S: We teach them modernization.

For Mihimir Girma, to understand how a modern generation that “comes willingly” to spirits might have come into existence, we need to understand the generations that preceded it. The statements of various spirits and the commentary of the exorcist contribute narrative threads to a generational historiography, which reads present spiritual threats in terms of social changes that occurred in the past, and reassesses the past through current spirits’ performances. Following Michael Lambek, I consider spirit possession to be a drama constituted by dialogic encounters between various human and non-human actors, implicated in the production of an historical consciousness that:

[I]s not reducible to a single attitude, but arises through the interplay of multiple voices. It is neither single nor static, but open. It is no mere response to the present, nor is it something that can be reduced to terms like resistance. Thus anthropology cannot state what it is, but can only describe the forms through which it is produced. (Lambek 1998:109)

In the following sections, I shall present a summary of the narrative of modernization as it is socially produced and articulated in the context of Istifanos. By doing so, I will illustrate the anxieties and dangers in which urban Orthodox Christians feel enmeshed, and the ways that such threats are explained and creatively reconfigured in Mihimir Girma's confrontations with the demons of modernity.

Imperial times, the spirit of the west, and the religion of the necktie

The relationship between demons and Ethiopia began to intensify with the generation that grew up before 1974, during the reign of the last Emperor. For Mihimir Girma, it was "a time when we were proud of modernization." His older helpers explained to me that in the sixties and seventies, a number of Ethiopians from the richer strata of society had been exposed increasingly to modern education, and started to adopt western clothing, to eat western food, and in general to develop western tastes and desires. Anxious as they were to emulate westerners and to access secular forms of knowledge, these Ethiopians not only lost touch with their tradition and faith, but their fascination with everything foreign translated into a radical questioning of many aspects of their society, which they labelled as "backward" and burdens to social progress (cf. Engelke 2007:36-42; 2010:177-178). "This is how the spirit of the west first came to this country: we opened the door and said 'welcome', we will listen to you and betray our fathers," commented Mihimir Girma in a sermon.

Mihimir Girma defined the superficial adherence to Orthodoxy practiced by these "new Ethiopians" as "the religion of the necktie" (*ye kravat haymanot*). The necktie, a decidedly foreign innovation, was one of the visible markers of a generation that started looking outside Ethiopia for answers to the country's under-development. It was a means through which the upper-class attempted to differentiate itself from "uneducated" or "traditionalist" Ethiopians. In the context of Istifanos, the "necktie" was cast discursively in opposition with the *mateb*: the necklace with a cross, which every Orthodox believer receives during baptism, and which is considered to be the most patent visual sign of Orthodox identity.

However, according to the exorcist, in the sixties and seventies these phenomena interested mostly the elites. It was just the beginning of the passion for imported, modern ideas and things at the expense of the millenarian history of the church—the prelude of successive and more critical phases in the history of the relationship between the country, evil spirits, and social change.

Children of the revolution and the spirit of socialism

According to Mihimir Girma, only with the revolution in 1974, and the socialist dictatorship—which lasted until 1991—have spirits extended their control over larger portions of the population. If the exorcist described the last years of the Empire as a time of “pride” and “stubbornness,” he spoke of the revolution as “a time when we tried to survive with betrayal, rejecting God’s law.” Commenting on socialism’s critique of religious institutions as part of a feudalistic, oppressive regime, the exorcist explained:

A cursing spirit entered us and our leaders have built a generation that repeated the “destroy it” slogan. There was this culture that promoted the destruction of our past history, the church, the monuments, and the heroes that protected the country [...] So we are harvesting a generation that grew up with the “destroy it” slogan. [...] [W]hat we sowed was a curse, what we reaped was a curse, too.

Mihimir Girma aligned “revolution” and “destruction” to the moral notion of “rebellion as sin” (*tigab*), which we have encountered in previous chapters. In the years of what the exorcist termed “atheist propaganda,” he lamented that “Ethiopianess (*Ytiopiawinet*) had gone out of us.” In his rhetoric, Orthodoxy and Ethiopianess were one and the same. For him, the fact that the Derg managed to extend considerable control over the church’s hierarchies was equivalent to “having the devil himself performing the mass.” As I noted in Chapter One, the then-Patriarch Tewofolos was imprisoned and killed by the regime, and a “puppet Patriarch,” to use Mihimir Girma’s expression, was installed in his place (see Donham 1999:142). The new Patriarch appointed thirteen new bishops, following the direct instructions of the government. As Doanld Donham argues, and as Mihimir Girma confirmed, this governmental strategy essentially transformed the EOC into an instrument of socialist propaganda (*ibid.*; see Chapter One). Mihimir Girma considered the clergy that cooperated with the socialist government to be traitors, and those who had been killed because of their resistance as veritable martyrs.

The exorcist's other references to the Derg were more oblique: "We are harvesting a generation possessed by spirits because their fathers raised the left hand," he said during a sermon. There is a play on double meaning in this statement: the reference is not only to socialist greetings, but also to the "left side", which, in Orthodox moral and spatial idiom, is associated with the demonic. The blood spilled by the political purges of the "Ethiopian Red Terror" (*kayh shibbir*) and the civil conflicts of these years are readily assimilated to a ritual sacrifice for the demons: "Spirits feed on blood. They used the people and the guns to get their tribute in blood. There cannot be any doubt about it," explained the exorcist.

The exorcist told me that, weakened by persecutions, controlled by the state, and deprived of its traditional source of income by the 1980 campaign of land redistribution, the EOC could not provide a thorough religious education to the masses. For him, the masses' disinterest in the church's teachings contributed to create a critical generational gap in religious knowledge. The exorcism of new spirits represents an occasion for the assessment of this knowledge gap through specific individual cases of affliction. As Mihimir Girma commented during an exorcism:

By age twenty-six he is already a victim. His parents don't know that he is suffering because of the spirit that seized him. They think that it is in the nature of people of his age to act the way they do. The problem is that even the family does not follow the church teachings. No prayer, no genuflection (*sigdet*), no room for prayer in the house (*s'elot bet*)... Just eating and sleeping. And now we have created a generation that does not even sleep.

The reference is again ironic (cf. Lambek 2003): modern people are disproportionately affected by insomnia due to their modern stress (*cinqet*); and the youth are insomniac in their pursuit of the nocturnal enjoyments offered by new dance clubs, and allowed by apparent parental permissiveness in recent years. Having forgotten the importance of Orthodoxy, the generation of fathers has transmitted to their progeny a "cold" and "half-hearted" faith, and the spirits that come with it.

This form of transmission also affected people in the most immanent aspects of their physicality. Those mothers who have not regularly taken communion, purified their stomachs by fasting, and drunk *s'ebel* to purge spirits nestled in their bodies, have unwittingly invited demons to take control of their "cursed womb" and, by extension, of the children it has produced. At Istifanos, one learns that people are "born with spirits"; in turn, spirits confirm that they have "brought up" their victims like a parent would. The generational transmission of spirits is aggravated by the involvement of

parents in the idolatrous veneration of spirits like *zar*. Treated as patrons to be kept in the family, rather than demons to be exorcized, *zar* now consider the children of their devotees as “wives,” “husbands,” and “sacrifices” (see Mercier 1996; cf. Aspen 2001; Young 1975a). As the exorcist surmised, “The devil owns this generation. [...] He tried to have his own generation and succeeded to have his children. He cultivated his own children.”

Modern spirits and modern selves: the current generation

While the parents of today’s young people might have offered sacrifices to tutelary spirits such as *zar*, Mihimir Girma considered contemporary youth to be disinterested in, if not ashamed of these practices. Solomon, the head of the exorcist’s helpers, reiterated that as people change so do spirits:

For example, Mihimir Girma asked one day: “Why do you possess these young people? They didn’t sacrifice a goat or a chicken to you.” The spirit answered: “Now I am as modern as they are” [...] Then Mihimir Girma asked: “How.” And the spirit said: “When young people smoke, chew *khat* [...] they are paying my due, so their soul is mine.”

Addiction (*sus*) figures as one of the main modern perversities associated with possession amongst young Ethiopians. In Istifanos, addiction is construed as the utmost expression of one’s enslavement to the seductions of the modern world. Addiction is a condition whereby the flesh dictates the rhythms of one’s life, clouds one’s capacity for judgment, and encourages laziness towards one’s duties, both sacred and mundane. Addiction runs counter to the concerted effort of Orthodox rituals—fasting *in primis*—geared towards constructing a Christian person who is the master of his or her desires, capable of establishing a productive detachment from excessive worldly entanglements (see Chapters Three and Five). The consumption of *khat* is also associated with Islam, and considered to be a recent innovation in the capital as well as a modern social crisis. As I noted in Chapter Two, my friend Esubalew defined chewing *khat* as “the devil’s fasting” (*ye saytan s’om*); those who chew, he explained, do not feel the need to eat and grow thinner and thinner, literally consumed by their addiction. Significantly, the phenomenological idiom that describes addiction presents stark similarities to that employed for spirit possession, both in terms of a critical loss of self-agency as well as of physical affliction.

During one exorcism, a possessed man brought a pipe used to smoke hashish on stage, kissing it frequently with affection. Amongst the confusion of the audience, who is

supposed to have no knowledge of such things, Mihimir Girma extracted his cross from his pocket and asked the possessed person to kiss it:

MG: Do you like this?

S: We hate it!

MG: Why? Kiss it like you kiss that thing [the pipe].

S: No, we don't need that. That doesn't belong to us. We love what belongs to us. Would you kiss the pipe if we asked you to? You would not.

In this exchange, the spirit neatly demarcates different and incompatible moral domains of materiality and practice, corroborating the exorcist's position on the depravity of young people's habits and tastes. The spirit went on to provide a meticulous description of various types of alcohol—ouzo, gin, Red Label whisky—that the young host used to drink on his nights out. The spirit then urged the exorcist to let it go, as it had better things to do than being exorcized: "Seriously speaking, we have to chew [*khat*] on Saturday, go to parties, etc." This satirical staging of youth culture provided the exorcist and senior members of the audience alike information about activities carried out in spaces unfamiliar to them. My friend Mellese, the father of two adolescent children, told me: "Since I started coming here I have learned a lot of things about youngsters. Our generation didn't know such things... We only drank *tilla* [traditional alcoholic beverage] during religious celebrations. In this generation the spirit is working really deep." On several occasions, Mihimir Girma ridiculed young entranced individuals who spoke in slang (*ye Arada qwamwa*), disapproved of women who wore trousers, and even publically cut people's dreadlocks. The exorcist regularly exhorted believers to come to church in traditional clothes, and advised women not to wear makeup. "Fashion," in his view, was another declension of the sinful and uncritical acceptance of the "foreign" and the "non-Ethiopian"—a distinctly "modern thing."

Young people's involvement in modern technology appeared to be particularly problematic. Some people even said that modern spirits have their own website, which allowed them to attract people through untraceable, faster, and more far-reaching networks. As Salomon told me, "Many modern things have the stamp of the devil upon it. It means that you should be wary of them, but not that all modern things are just evil." This statement—from a man who gained a master degree in engineering from a

European university—testifies to a deep ambivalence in Ethiopians’ relationships with modernity. Just as we should be cautious not to construe possession as an unmodern hangover of tradition (Moore & Sanders 2001:2; see also Pels 2003), we should be equally careful about categorizing those who attend Istifanos as essentially anti-modern (cf. Engelke 2010). Followers of Mihimir Girma desire computers, biomedical care, modern education, and certainly they are not ready to give up modernity’s comforts for a hermitical life. Rather, people want to get out of the feeling that modern desires—and modern spirits—control them. The exorcist himself makes ample use of modern technology. The point, he suggested, is that there are “modern things” and “modern things”: a camera is not the same as a hashish pipe, and even when it comes to a camera, “One must be careful and use it for God [...]. I use it for God’s glory but I know this object can be used by Satan himself.” In essence, the moral valence of a given item is determined by the purposes of its applicability, its assessment vis-à-vis Orthodox tenets, and its potential for reinsertion as a lower element in the Orthodox hierarchy. Rather than a rejection of everything modern, here we see a selective and reflexive engagement with the very stuff of modernity—a point to which I shall return.

3. New spirits in the ancient Christian country

As we have seen, spirits are inextricably tied to the unfolding of human history. They follow the pulse of its development and adapt to it. While in Istifanos one dominant public complaint is that “humans are becoming evil spirits” by assuming moral traits that are unambiguously demonic, it is equally true that new spirits resemble increasingly new types of Ethiopians, mirroring their modern habits and vices (cf. Mercier 1997b). In this section, I want to attend closely to what new spirits say, how exorcist and audience react to their claims, and what this juxtaposition of voices may suggest about contemporary Ethiopia. By so doing, I illustrate how individual histories of affliction are taken as specific manifestations of spiritual threats that all Orthodox Christians currently face; and I demonstrate how discourses and practices of exorcism rely on complex confluences of, and analogical links between, the personal and the social, the individual body and the Orthodox community.

The spirit of Protestantism in context

The mutual entwinement of modern spirits and modern people is particularly manifest in the case of *menfiq*, or “heretic” spirits, a class of Protestant spirits affecting an

increasing number of Orthodox people. This entirely novel category of spirits made its first appearance in the early 1990s, a period coinciding with a rapid surge in the number of Protestant converts and Protestantism's increasing visibility in the public sphere.

Before proceeding further, let me recall a few critical passages from the history of multi-religious Ethiopia, highlighted in Chapter One. Despite severe limitations during the Derg, the EOC retained a privileged role in the multi-religious panorama (Bonacci 2000; Donham 1999). After the fall of the Derg, the lifting of restrictions on religious expression and the recognition of different faiths as equal under the new constitutional law brought about rapid changes on an unprecedented scale. The EOC found itself deprived of its historical advantages in a new religious market, where different religious groups now competed fiercely for visibility, political influence, and expansion. In the new scramble for souls, the most successful among these groups was a variegated constellation of Protestant churches. While the number of Orthodox Christians still constituted 54% of the national population in 1984, the census conducted in 2007 revealed that their numbers had diminished dramatically to 43%. As I noted earlier, this decrease in adherents to the EOC coincided with the exponential growth of Protestant churches, and their new conversion campaigns aimed at gaining converts amongst EOC believers (Haustein & Ostebo 2011:758).

Having previously proselytised mainly in the non-Christian south, Protestant churches started expanding in the historically Orthodox central and northern territories. This unprecedented direct confrontation engendered new types of religious polemics (see Abbink 2011) and conflicts between the two groups. The EOC reacted to the new challenge by reaffirming its centrality to national history, and its role as the guarantor and symbol of Ethiopia's continuity as a political entity (see Marcus 2001). Concomitantly, the Protestant critique of Orthodox theology provoked a neo-traditionalist response on behalf of different Orthodox movements, which called for a renewal of the old faith while stressing the necessity of self-consciously rediscovering the roots of religious tradition (cf. Meron 2015).

Though not directly traceable to any specific movement, Mihimir Girma's rituals are one expression of this wider revivalism. Movements such as the *Mahaber Kidussan* support an increasing "intellectualization" of religion, by sponsoring Sunday school

programmes for the laity and encouraging lay militant activism in working places and universities; but Mihimir Girma's exorcisms draw less on unimpassioned intellect, and more on the viscosity of embodied experience (cf. Lambek 2010a)—at times openly opposing the intellectualization of Orthodoxy as a fraught, modernist endeavour. Let me literally “leave the stage” to the *menafiq* spirits.

The subtle voices of heresy

After having forced a *menafiq* spirit who claimed to “speak God's words” to admit its demonic nature, Mihimir Girma asked firmly:

MG: If you are a demon, how can you speak God's words? [Turning to the audience]

Many people are deceived for they believe that Satan doesn't speak well of God's word.

[Turning to the possessed]. How do you deceive people in this way?

S: You know, through songs.

MG: Ok...

S: With God's words, talking to them politely.

This excerpt illustrates the subtlety typical of new spirits who do not overtly oppose Christianity, but deploy ostensibly Christian language to carry out their demonic plans. In the church of Istifanos, one learns that *menafiq* spirits attack their victims through an array of seemingly innocuous, even pious, activities linked to *Pente*⁴⁸ forms of worship. Any involvement in *Pente* religious practices, spaces, and media becomes an act of apostasy and an “invitation to the devil.” The fact that the spirit declared that it deceived Orthodox Christians through songs (*mezmur*) is not accidental. As Aynada, a formerly possessed young woman, explained:

For example, you are Orthodox, but it [the spirit] attracts you with the music that the *Pente* have. It's beautiful music with many modern instruments, very appealing but worldly. The music will attract you and you will have a second religion. Then you will be the toy of the spirit.

Many of my young Orthodox friends listened to *Pente* music. Attendants of Istifanos chastise this modern tendency, remarking that, from an Orthodox perspective, religious music must conform to rigid rhythmical canons and should be performed in

⁴⁸ I shall refer to Protestants as *Pente*, the local truncated form of “Pentecostal.” The word does not adequately describe the variegated universe of Ethiopian Protestantism, but it is accepted by most Protestants I know and is widely used in Istifanos.

churches, with only a few rigorously traditional musical instruments. *Pente* music makes ample use of modern electric instruments and appealing pop rhythms, which make it “easy,” “less heavy,” and “less boring.” Yet, as some Orthodox observers argued, the worldly appeal of such music—its very lightness—is exactly what is dangerous about it (cf. Oosterbaan 2009). To lure modern people with modern lives, spirits elaborate strategies that meet historically specific tastes and necessities.

These anxieties become even sharper when spirits speak of the relationships between Protestant converts and their Orthodox families:

MG: What was your goal?

S: I seized one so that I would get all the family.

MG: Is this how you do it?

S: [...] Little by little we use him to make them all Pente.

MG: Ok. How?

S: This is our work. We go to them [family member] with a smile, “don’t be angry,” and we explain the Gospel [...] We make them doubt their religion so that the spirit can enter them.

MG: [Turning to the audience] This is how they do it. Beware because the enemy is in the house.

This dynamic is all too familiar to the audience. Indeed, in the Orthodox imaginary, the progressive penetration of Protestantism through a family member, and its infective spread to the entire household, are central to *Pente* politics of conversion. Salomon commented: “If half of my family is *Pente* and prays for me... If I don’t have the protection of the Holy Spirit, their spirit may attack me.” This logic represents both a perversion and an inversion of the Orthodox mechanics of mediation encountered in previous chapters, whereby family members solicit divine blessing on behalf of others. *Pente* are understood to be mediators too, but of the demonic. Salomon’s worries echo a vision of Protestantism as an essentially divisive religion. For him, the unavoidable frictions generated by conversion “set son against father, mother against sons, in a way which is not Ethiopian.” Note that, many of the concerns that Mihimir Girma and his followers highlight bring into focus the same familial dynamics that I have described in previous chapters. The appeal of these exorcistic performances lies precisely in their

capacity to tie the troubles of individuals and families to changes and problems occurring on a larger scale.

Jörg Haustein and Terje Ostebo note that *Pente*'s "strict prohibition of alcohol and dancing tends to divide social activities and family gathering" (2011:766), including religious feasts, thus affecting core reproductive dynamics of the Orthodox social fabric. According to the exorcist, while *Pente* would refuse to dance in mundane settings, they eagerly engage in hysterical dances at church, inebriated as they are by what they claim to be the Holy Spirit. Their choreographies of the body, for Salomon, conflict with the composed and heavily regulated religious dance taking place in Orthodox churches: "Our dance is clean and proper, in their churches men and women dance together like in a club and bark like dogs." Such commentary surrounding the aesthetics of piety, as well as the moral qualities of its media, are crucial to a delicate process of boundary-making (see Engelke 2010) and strategies of othering involving groups who both claim to be followers of Christ.

Orthodox Christians are highly suspicious of *Pente*'s ecstatic experiences. After a spirit spoke in tongues for some time, the exorcist sarcastically commented:

MG: That is a good one. It would have been better if you had translated it.

S: I don't know the meaning.

Somebody from the crowd: Thank you very much.

In this exchange, the humiliated spirit is forced to corroborate Orthodox assumptions about the semantic emptiness of glossolalia. Orthodox believers are frequently mistrustful of glossolalia because of its auditory resemblance to *megwarat* and *melefler*—that is, the production of nonsensical speech and guttural sounds typical of the onset of demonic trance. In the performances of *menafiq* spirits like the one in the excerpt above, Orthodox believers find a vivid validation their suspicions.

"It's just to impress people," commented Aynada, a formerly possessed young woman, who linked glossolalia to anxieties about *Pente* prophecy:

The spirit is on their tongue [...] Because they are brokers (*dallala*). They will convince you with their beautiful speech. You are innocent and they will give you a beautiful speech. The spirit is a spirit of the tongue, but it's a liar spirit. They are full of lies. They talk to you today, approaching you privately: "What is your problem?" The day after they will invite you [to their church] and the pastor will speak in tongues (*lisan*, in Ge'ez⁴⁹)

⁴⁹ Liturgical language of the EOC.

and say “Diego has such and such problem.” But somebody told him in advance what your problem was.

Prophecy is reframed as a cheap trick used to lure naïve people into conversion. A story circulating in Istifanos tells that in rural areas, *Pente* stage fake miracles by throwing money from the roofs of Protestant churches so as to attract poor Orthodox farmers. More significantly, the association between *Pente* and *dallala* brokers has another layer of meaning beyond the notion of *Pente* as mediators of evil spirits. *Dallala* brokers connect supply to demand, acting as an interface in the rental of houses, the purchase of cars, the employment of domestic workers, and so forth. They are known for their articulate speech, which they use to coax people into bad deals, pretending to act in the interests of the client while hiding the careful calculations of their disproportionate gains. Of a *dallala*, people would say, “he roasts *teff* with his mouth⁵⁰” (*be afteff yokolal*). Like *dallala*, *Pente* are known for the proverbial kindness with which they approach Orthodox believers. For Aynada, a *Pente*’s command of Biblical references is meant to reassure the person approached that their interest in his or her problem is inspired by Christian concerns, rather than by an aggressive politics of conversion—or, worse, by demonic intent. If the spirit is as cunning as to publicly celebrate God, a *Pente*’s use of scriptures and gentleness is consistent with the mischievous subtlety of the spirit animating the very project of proselytism.

Above all, those who followed Mihimir Girma were particularly perplexed by *menafiq* spirits’ propensity to prayer and their enthusiastic invocation of Jesus’ name. Mihimir Girma dissipated such confusion by revealing the true identity of the spirit. Addressing a spirit singing *Pente* hymns, the exorcist asked:

MG: Are you a demon (saytan)?

S: I am speaking Amharic right? I said I am a demon.

The spirit continued to sing hymns in tongues; only the word “Jesus” was intelligible.

MG: Which Jesus are you talking about?

S: The fake one.

The audience laughed loudly.

⁵⁰ *Teff* is a local cereal used to make the staple bread, *injera*.

MG: *The one you praise?*

S: *Yes, he is my guarantor. [...] Jesus is Lord!*

MG: *Indeed He is the Lord!*

Some people in the audience appeared confused. A woman shouted loudly “*Ende*,” an expression signifying both stupor and disapproval. The bewilderment of the audience is hardly surprising, considering that what they see is a *Pente* demon, which claims to be possessed by the Holy Spirit, speaking through the body of an Orthodox host. The spirit’s admission of following a “fake Jesus” contributes to marking distinctive features of the Christian other while effectively transducing their value in the field of the demonic. *Pente* are thus placed not just beyond the symbolic borders of Christianity, but beyond those of humanity itself. In this dramaturgical setting, the laughter of the audience expresses moral satisfaction for the public humiliation of the arrogant and deceitful spirit. At the same time, laughter acts as an index of superiority vis-à-vis a ridiculed religious other, disclosing the heresy of its beliefs and offering the shame of this unveiling to the avid consumption of an Orthodox audience in need to be emotively confirmed in their positionality (cf. Bakhtin 1984:77-81).

In the excerpt, the exorcist could only agree that Jesus is indeed the Lord. But the agreement is only apparent. An ontological discrepancy exists between the referents of exorcist’s and spirit’s speech: they are talking about two different Jesuses. The *Pente*’s invocation of a “fake Jesus” and a “false messiah” is framed within eschatological narratives that Orthodox believers use to explain, among other things, the exponential growth of Protestantism. As Solomon had it, “Most people argue that *Pente* preach about Jesus Christ, but the Bible says ‘in the last days, some people will come to cheat using my name’. The Bible is talking about evil spirits.” He was echoed by Habibi, a formerly possessed man: “You know Jesus talks about them in the Gospel: ‘they will use my name’. He didn’t say ‘the name of my mother’ or any other name. He said ‘my name’.”

The revelation of a “fake Jesus” is tightly imbricated in religious polemics surrounding Orthodox intercession, as the following excerpt of the exorcism of a *menafiq* spirit vividly illustrates:

MG: *Say it: son of the Virgin Mary. Repeat!*

S: *[no answer]*

MG: They stopped. I think they are angry [audience laughs].

MG: [Turning to the audience] When it comes to the Virgin Mary it [the spirit] is trapped. No doubt, it stops there. Dead end. [To the spirit] What happened?

The exorcist hit the possessed person with the *mekutaria*, asking the spirit to repeat after him:

MG: May the mother of Jesus be blessed.

S: [No answer].

MG: [Turning to the audience] A generation that doesn't accept the Virgin Mary is a generation without a mother.

Earlier on, the exorcist had focused on the same topic:

MG: Can you praise the Virgin Mary?

S: I don't know her. How could you... We don't do such things.

This excerpt condenses essential doctrinal differences. In Mihimir Girma's view, *Pente* maintain that Jesus Christ is an intercessor.⁵¹ For many of my Orthodox friends, such a position implies an ontological difference between God and Jesus, as in Orthodoxy there cannot be intercession without the hierarchical differentiation of two distinct spiritual entities. As Salomon said: "I can't understand the confusion of these *Pente*. We say Jesus is God. If he is God, how can he be an intercessor? Who would he intercede to? To himself? Saints intercede, angels intercede, Mary intercedes. God cannot intercede with God." As we have seen, in Orthodox cosmology, intercession is the prerogative of a plethora of saintly beings subordinate to the divine, while Jesus participates instead in full Lordship—to praise the Son *is* to praise the Father.

Pente not only misrecognize the authority of Orthodox intercessors, but also mock such figures by teaching that saints are "simple human beings" and that praying to them is to commit idolatry. Even worse, *Pente* are termed "anti-Mariam," that is, people who are against Mary. Their claim that Mary is no different from any other woman in any decisive way is particularly offensive and unacceptable to Orthodox believers. Yet, the inability of the spirit to say "son of the Virgin Mary," and its muteness when asked to praise her, provide tangible evidence to the reality of the very

⁵¹ This view reflects Orthodox assumptions and is not necessarily endorsed by many Ethiopian Protestants.

powers that *Pente* defy. The eloquence of this silence, and the spirit's claim that it doesn't know Mary, confirm once more the falsity of the *Pente* Jesus: a Jesus without the right kind of mother and the right kind of genealogy. Echoing Mihimir Girma's assertion that a generation "that does not accept Mary is a generation without a mother," Salomon described *Pente* as "orphans." Note that the persuasiveness of the attack against other religious groups derives its force, time and time again, from the affective language of kinship. Even beyond the specific case presented above, the effects of global, foreign forces are felt not simply at the level of national politics, but critically affect the very sphere of the domestic—the basic unit through which Orthodox society is reproduced.

For Tafari, a young Orthodox woman attacked by a *menafiq* spirit while attending a *Pente* service out of curiosity, a Christianity without Mary cannot exist: "In our religion you cannot separate Mary from Jesus because she is the source. For me, she is my saviour, she is my way to salvation." Her view resonates with Orthodox theological conceptions of Mary as the "new Eve," the instrument of the redemption of humanity—which, in the words of Mihimir Girma, "was damned because of a woman and saved because of another from whom Jesus took flesh." Mary is also considered to be the seal of a divine covenant with mankind, and countless stories of her intercession with God on behalf of Ethiopia attest to the salience of this covenant in national history. Indeed, Ethiopia is considered to be "the country of Mary" (*ye Mariam ager*), and Mary is one of the nation's patron saints. Hence, a direct attack on Mary amounts to a radical negation of Orthodoxy's very essence. And that is why, when spirits provide evidence for Orthodox truth claims about Marian power, the crowd cheers with heightened excitement.

Menafiq spirits also attacked the scaffolding of Orthodox hierarchies of mediation by denigrating Orthodox material culture, and negating the spiritual potency of sacred spaces:

MG: What do you call the church?

S: Just a building. That is where you gather. I lie comfortably in my bed and pray God. That is enough.

MG: No need to come here?

S: No need at all. It is said even in the Bible: “Pray in your house and I will reward you outside”. That’s it. I do what I have to do in the house [...] why would I go to the monasteries when I can be comfortable in the public park?

Mobilizing the authority of scriptures, the *Pente* demon denigrates the spiritless materiality of Orthodox churches and sacred sites, proposing a Protestant model of unmediated human-divine communication. In this game of refracted perspectives, the exorcist elicits a caricatural and selective image of the *Pente*, while the spirit articulates its own culturally situated reading of Orthodoxy, offering a dramatized, derogatory rendition of some of Orthodoxy’s salient features. In witnessing these events, Orthodox spectators of possession do not merely learn something about the other; they also come to grasp something important about how the other sees them (Boddy 1989:355-357). Allegorical texts of possession, Janice Boddy claims, “could pass as ethnographies. And ethnographies certainly they are, but ethnographies by reflection” (ibid.:356). Through singling out and marking mutual difference, and offering the possibility of apprehending oneself from the other’s point of view, Orthodoxy is reconstituted as a shared object in and through the drama of exorcism. And, through such dynamics, differences between self and other are incisively demarcated (see Kramer 1993).

The drama of exorcistic confrontation is not just an issue of textuality, however, but a drama that thrives on the visceral experience of violence and pain. Consider the following example of a spirit discussing the tools of exorcism:

MG: Which spirit are you?

S: I am the menafiq. We are going blind in front of you. We tried but...

Mihimir Girma spilled some holy water on the face of the possessed; the demon screamed in agony and the body of its host moved in a disorderly way, violently hitting the floor several times. One could hear distinctively only sentences like “enough” or “I am burning.” The exorcist continued:

MG: Did you come here to exorcize me?

S: We came here to pray for you [...] But you came here with your weapons and the grenades to hit her body.

MG: What is the grenade?

S: The water [holy water].

MG: *Is it a grenade?*

S: *Are you kidding? You are the driver of the tank and that [the holy water] is the grenade.*

The spirit screamed in pain when the bodily surface of its host was touched by holy water. It begged the exorcist to stop torturing it, shouting “I am burning!” The conversation points to the arrogance of *Pente*, who commonly claim that Orthodox believers are host to a number of evil spirits due to their lack of scriptural knowledge. The crowd takes particular satisfaction in this farcical turns of events: the spirit who came to exorcize the exorcist is, in the end, exorcized. The sheer suffering of the spirit adds to this vindictive pleasure. The military idiom used by the spirit to describe *s’ebel*, which *Pente* dismiss as “common water,” confirms for the audience not only the superiority of Orthodox ritual means, but that what they see, and viscerally participate in, is indeed a violent cosmic battle. The meta-narrative of exorcism is that this battle can be won (although, as we shall see, winning it is not so straightforward).

The exorcist portrayed *Pente* as followers of a “religion coming from abroad,” insisting that “This is a religion of the whites, incompatible with the history of Ethiopia.” *Menafiq* spirits are considered tangible manifestations of the foreign networks in which Ethiopia is caught up. *Pente* are construed as practitioners of a “business religion” that enjoys disproportionate economic support coming from a white elsewhere. The economic success of *Pente* practitioners, and their ubiquitous presence in the non-governmental sector are taken as proof of their ramified transnational relationships—relationships in which *Pente* themselves take pride (see Robbins 2004b). Orthodox believers interpret the scale of such relations, and the capital they mobilize and circulate at unparalleled speed, as a serious threat to a poor country that has heroically defended its independence and indigenous Orthodox religion over the centuries.

In open contrast to the foreignness of Protestantism, Mihimir Girma’s narrative celebrates the autochthony of the EOC, insisting that the rootedness of Orthodoxy in Ethiopian soil is no mere metaphor:

The Ethiopian land is soaked in the blood of many Christian martyrs and saints. Many Orthodox missionaries in ancient times were killed by pagan kings, and they become the heroes of religion (*ye haymanot jegenoch*). You know that in our church we teach that after Jesus died the angel Urael collected Jesus’ blood in a cup and spilled it onto the land across the world. This blood was spilled on Ethiopia and we have built churches where

it fell. During the Derg many priests [...] were killed. They were martyrs too. Their blood was made holy. *Pente* do not have that. They do not have the history of sacrifice.

This discourse marks *Pente* as strangers and invaders, people with no ties either to the history of salvation—that, for Orthodox informants, is the history of the EOC itself—nor to the national territory. This narrative offers a partial answer to the absence of new Muslim spirits⁵²: Muslims are, for good or for worse, an integral part of Ethiopian history, and their roots extend far down the centuries to when Ethiopian Christian rulers granted asylum to the family of the prophet Muhammad when he was threatened by religious persecution. Muslims were regularly healed by the exorcist, and even allowed to say “Inshallah” when freed from spirits. “Unlike the *Pente*, they respect Mary and do not try to convert us,” clarified Salomon, “differently from them [the *Pente*], the Muslims come with respect and they do not attack our religion. So we respect them. If they wish to convert we are happy, but we do not force them.”

Spirits of the Orient

Osho or Rampa spirits—sometime known collectively as Osho-Rampa—come from India and Japan. Named after the authors of popular literature on oriental forms of spirituality, these spirits made their way into Ethiopia through the translation of these authors’ works, now found in many book stands in the streets of Addis Ababa. Such literature appeals especially to the target population of these spirits: relatively well-educated youth in search of existential answers different than those provided by the EOC.

Osho-Rampa spirits draw together many themes connected to Ethiopia’s relationship to the outside world and rapid social change. They speak of the decline of the EOC’s popularity amongst the literate and urban youth, and of a yearning for the acquisition of knowledge of the world typical of such people. The stories these spirits tell exemplify the desire to migrate, and the craving for western commodities and pleasures while at home. Despite their ostensibly “oriental” traits, I suggest that Osho-Rampa spirits embody—if circuitously and allegorically—spiritual propensities understood by Orthodox believers to be peculiar to whites. Specifically, they articulate the restless search for flexible forms of spirituality that do not require allegiance to the rigid norms of an institutionalized religion, or even postulate the necessity of a

⁵² However, traditional Muslim *zar*—like, for instance, Adal Mote, known at least from the early 20th century (see Leiris 1988; Mercier 1988)—continue to be exorcized at this site.

personified divinity⁵³. In many ways, the Osho-Rampa spirits' questioning of Orthodoxy and the weight of its tradition resembles the challenges posed by *menafiq* spirits; occasionally, both spirits overlapped in a same host.

Consider the following interaction between the exorcist and a particularly eloquent Rampa spirit:

MG: Who are you?

S: Rampa and it means Buddhism.

MG: Is that the aim of Rampa?

S: Buddhism is the religion and the aim is... There are some steps. The last stage of Buddhism is Nirvana. That is the ultimate end. When one reaches Nirvana, he becomes a god. There is no such thing as God. Everybody is God. You yourself are God. That is what the teaching is about. It involves leaving your flesh and when it rots, you move to another body. That means that you will be reborn seven times repeating the cycle.

MG: Do you light a candle?

S: Yes. You light this up and you meditate. You look deep inside.

MG: You do that naked?

S: Yes. I meditate with closed doors. You prepare and then you look deep inside. When you look deep inside you know what will happen in the future and you prepare yourself accordingly. If something will happen, you will know. [...] You go to other places and you will appear somewhere else too. Then you will be able to see your own flesh and you will be able to go anywhere while your flesh is still sitting in a quiet room. No passport, no visa [...]

MG: Without a passport?

S: I am telling you it's like the wind [...] First you make him [the host] avoid this [the cross] and you forbid him to go to churches by telling him that God should always be there with you, not only in churches. Let us say a child is choking and there is a doctor nearby. Do you think that he saves the child because you ask him to do so? His profession compels him to do so. It is God's job to save you. Whichever way you go, he shall pave your way.

MG: [Turning to the audience] This generation is gifted with the skill of philosophizing. This generation is subjected to such obsessions and their behaviour creates ways for the

⁵³ Also, as Tom Boylston has pointed out (pers. comm.), young people emphasize that the new oriental literature advocates a spirituality that incorporates hedonistic pleasures—especially sexual ones—thus turning impure things into spiritual ones.

spirits to get easily into them. They think what the foreigners are writing is always true [...] and that helps the devil to get into their minds.

Let me tackle some of the issues raised in this exchange separately. The perversity of the teachings of this spirit, and the cultural alterity it stands for, is most marked by the spirit's vision of divinity. Indeed, the spirit only seems to rule out God's existence. More to the point, it questions Orthodox conceptual frameworks of human-divine relationships, democratizing divinity by disentangling it from the grid of hierarchical distinctions between Creator and creature. As Salomon put it, "This is the sin of the modern generation; it is a contradiction: God became man for us, but they want man to become God."

On the one hand—akin to its *menafiq* counterpart—the Rampa spirit denies the necessity and legitimacy of the institutional apparatus of Orthodoxy, and questions the relevance of authorized sacred spaces ("God should always be there with you, not only in churches"). On the other, through the cunning metaphor of the doctor and the patient, the spirit deliberates on the Creator's duties towards His creatures in a manner that runs counter to Orthodox notions of cosmological order. As Messay Kebede explains, "No direct, transparent correspondence exists between [divine] will and its reflection in the visible words" (1999:183). God is unbounded from any human-made obligation in the exercise of limitless power, and His will is placed beyond human questionability.

Salomon also labelled the spirits' doctrine as diabolical because they are postulated on a cosmo-economics of grace in which "God has to do everything for you and everything is given to you with no effort." Standing in stark opposition to Orthodox theologies of spiritual achievement, the view of this Rampa spirit is associated with that of *Pente* who—according to some of Mihimir Girma's followers—believe that the most significant action towards securing salvation is to accept Jesus as your personal saviour and Lord. As we have seen, Orthodox believers instead see salvation as a distinctly cumulative and relational process, resulting from the correct performance of a number of ritual and devotional acts over a lifetime.

The labelling of the current generation's style of reasoning as "philosophizing" is telling. The EOC is highly sceptical of philosophy (*filsifinna*), which, in most cases—and especially when not taught within churchly settings—is considered to be

antithetical to faith. Faith requires submission, deference, and acceptance, while excessively eager metaphysical ruminations are tantamount to heresy (Levine 1965:67).

The exorcist lamented that many young people have developed an interest in meditation and yoga. In the conversation above, the Rampa spirit describes meditation through a specific iconography: it is a practice of isolation, and requires being alone, closing doors. Thus construed, it stands at odds with the aesthetics of Orthodox communal worship. The spirit arranges the body of its victim in Buddhist-like postures of meditation, expressing a tranquillity and cheerful serenity that some of my Orthodox informants contrast with the panoply of solemn and grave embodied forms of deference they are expected to perform, dramatizing submission and contrition. The fact that meditation takes place while the host is naked marks out this practice from the domain of normative religiosity even more decidedly.

The Rampa spirit helped its host to “look deep inside,” causing him to avoid contact with the external world. While at one level this quest for isolation appears contrastive with Orthodoxy, at another, it is vaguely reminiscent of monkhood. Yet, while monks pursue worldly isolation in order to better pray to God, here, since everybody is his own God, the only possible addressee of veneration is a divinized self. This collapse of the self into itself—a spiritual onanism of sorts, in the veiled suggestion of Salomon—is closely associated with another modern perversion: psychology. For Mihimir Girma, psychological knowledge, and particularly self-help literature—to which the books of Osho and Rampa are assimilated—is antagonistic to Orthodoxy in that it presupposes the existence of an internal, true self as the locus of choices and motivations. In the exorcist’s view, psychology promotes an interiorization of responsibility with regards to social relations and obligations, proposing that the will to cultivate them should come from “inside yourself.” As we have seen in the previous chapters, externalist Orthodox theories of relationality often start with normative obligations and relational codes that are given, pre-existing the individual, and perceived as divinely sanctioned. Deferential adherence to such codes of conduct is the measure of the morality of relatedness, rather than primarily internal motives and their self-scrutiny.

Finally, the capacity developed by the host to travel without a visa or a passport, to be in two places at the same time, and to foresee the future bears striking resemblances to the illicit and malevolent practices of spirit mediums and other practitioners of the occult (*tenqway*). These skills contradict the spirit's declared morally neutral identity, underlining its continuity with familiar categories of evil. Indeed, the relationship between Osho-Rampa spirits and religious paragons of the good appears especially fraught:

MG: Ok, what is this picture? [Pointing to an image of Mary]

S: [...] He [the host] used to call her the Virgin Mary.

MG: What?

S: He loved her so much.

MG: Why don't you believe that she is a mediator?

S: What is the use of the bottle after you finish the perfume?

The crowd laughed loudly; the spirit continued raising its voice:

S: Yes. The perfume is the remedy. You know... Him.

MG: Who is that?

S: Jesus. And the bottle is her [...]

MG: So you want him [the human host] to let her out of his life like you leave the bottle after you use the perfume?

S: Exactly. Come on, that's enough. Is that a tie?

The spirit referred mockingly to the exorcist's cross, but screamed when the cross was pressed onto the head of the host.

MG: What happened?

S: Do you think you are doing me a favour? You are burning me. Come on, please. I am begging you. Not only you are burning my face, even he [the host] is struggling.

Similarly to *menafiq* spirits, the Rampa spirit in the excerpt defies Marian intercession through elaborate, even elegant metaphors. The spirit's mastery of figurative speech indexes the category of people it most commonly possesses: youth educated through modern schooling. The spirit's question about Mihimir Girma's cross—"Is that a tie?"—lends itself to multiple interpretations. On the one hand, the comment can be

seen as outright disrespect of the sacred. On the other, the spirit's ignorance about key Orthodox symbols bespeaks its radical foreignness to this Christian land. And yet, as spirits resemble their hosts, this bizarre question might satirically and hyperbolically typify the sheer unfamiliarity of modern youth with their religious tradition (cf. Boddy 1989). To stay with theatrical language, comedy quickly gives way to tragedy as soon as the cross is pressed onto the forehead of the host, burning the spirit, confirming the efficacy of sacred paraphernalia and the fact that Orthodoxy is not a joke.

The Rampa spirit displayed its modernity also by distancing itself from other traditional Ethiopian spirits, commonly venerated in the *zar* cult, which are exorcized during the same ritual:

S: They are silly. They ask for silly things like making coffee or something like that. That is shameful.

MG: Shameful?

S: Yes.

MG: And are you not?

S: Never! We possess literate people.

As Salomon explained to me, “No animal sacrifices or offerings such as coffee are required for the spirits of a generation that reads” (cf. Mercier 1997a). Yet, in a sense, the offering spirits exact is that of one's faith. Young peoples' keen interest in “foreign literature” and knowledge of the world is perceived as distancing them from Orthodoxy, as well as increasing their vulnerability to spiritual attack. Before returning to this point, let me offer another brief excerpt from an interaction between the exorcist and a Rampa spirit afflicting a young man.

The Rampa spirit enacted a similar strategy of othering and differentiation within the spirits' society:

MG: What religion are you?

S: Us... We are the Rampa spirit.

MG: Which one is better: the Rampa demon or the Ethiopian demon?

S: If you look at the Ethiopian demon... They affect one's hands, twist jaws and things like that, and they sit on one's stomach. This is silly.

Contrary to known categories of the demonic, the ways in which spirits partial to the literate attack their victims is peculiar: “They start from the head”, Salomon explained. As one spirit confessed: “We are fast. We use the tiniest gap in the mind. For example, we don’t wait till the person says: ‘Was it like this’? In the moment he says ‘was...’ we are already in. We enter when he doubts.” Spirits instil doubt in young people, and possess those who are already somewhat doubtful about Orthodox truths: spirits are at once the sickness and the symptoms of a changing society. Doubts, Mihimir Girma explained, are fuelled by young peoples’ frantic search for western secular knowledge, which the exorcist cast in stark opposition to local, Orthodox knowledge. The fact that the new generation looks beyond national boundaries for answers to their many questions is an index of their particular vulnerability to the dramatic societal changes that the country has experienced in recent years, after the post-Derg opening up to the western world. At the same time, the subtext of exorcism portrays modern youth as dangerous agents of change who need to be reformed and brought back firmly into the Orthodox tradition.

Osho-Rampa spirits also deem traditional spirits to be backward, and typify their mediums as “fake” and ignorant. New spirits’ loathing towards idolatrous traditional practices mirrors the modern attitudes of their hosts. The critique of traditional spirit cults voiced by new spirits allows a strange convergence of interests, helping Mihimir Girma to condemn aspects of Ethiopian culture that are themselves considered unorthodox. Indeed, the exorcist’s engagement with traditional culture is animated by tactics of selection similar to those he applies to the assessment of modernity. The ancient Ethiopian tradition glorified during exorcistic performances is itself an entity purified from idolatrous practices, such as spirit mediumship and illicit forms of magic which some Orthodox laymen do not necessarily consider antagonistic to Orthodoxy. Crucially, this purification necessitates the translation of spirits such as *zar*—considered by some people to be morally neutral—into dangerous instances of the demonic (see Meyer 1999; cf. Oosterbaan 2009:57). Much as Martijn Oosterbaan describes for Brazil, illicit beliefs and practices are not immediately dismissed as mere superstition; instead, exorcism temporarily incorporates spiritual entities worshipped in traditional cults, representing them as demons and demonstrating their evil nature in the most graphic and didactic way (2009:58).

After years practising as an exorcist, Mihimir Girma came to conclude that spirits like Osho and Rampa write their own books, and that books themselves can be possessed—“The spirit is on the page and in the character.” In a similar vein, Salomon complained:

The book is available here in this country and people read it and use it. There are also other books they read before Rampa’s book: books about psychology. Then, step by step, they get used to it and the spirits enters them. [...] It presents itself in a way that the modern society can accept. It was there long ago [...] Now it became a modern spirit.

For Salomon and the exorcist, the adaptive plasticity of spirits, and their capacity to create fast-circulating media of demonic propagation—extending their influence to new material domains—contributed to making the world an increasingly unsafe place (cf. Geschiere 1997). And the western world—as we shall see in the next section—was not in much better condition.

Western spirits and the whites

Mihimir Girma often addressed the spirits in the crowd by their country of origin: “from Italy” (*ke T’alia*), “England” (*ke Inglis ager*), “France” (*ke Farensai*). These spirits may belong to different typologies, but they all affect mobile hosts who have migrated abroad. Here I will briefly highlight how discourses about spirits and the west, as well as the discourses produced by spirits coming from the west, sustain and validate the grand narrative of exorcism.

According to Mihimir Girma, the western world is fully under the grip of the devil. There, unlike Ethiopia, spirits are not exorcised by appropriate ritual means, since most whites lack faith or profess religions that are themselves demonic (like Protestantism). Mihimir Girma complained to me that, “In Germany churches have become dance clubs, in England they build pubs inside churches, and in France they do not even allow you to wear a cross in school.” During various exorcisms, the spirits confirmed these assumptions, and added further indecent details: “They [the foreigners] do not teach religion to children;” “They believe only in *injera* [staple bread, but meaning material things];” “We [the spirit influencing westerners and Ethiopian migrants] never give money to the church because we have to buy cars.” In foreign countries, the exorcist explained:

There is no time to thank God. Sometime, when you talk about God in front of them [whites], they say that they live for themselves and that he doesn’t exist. They say that there is no such thing as God because if there was they would never be in such a situation and have all these problems.

According to Mihimir Girma, “The white man has become a demon.” So profound is the penetration of Satan in the west that white people do not even manifest signs of possession. Ethiopian migrants become increasingly vulnerable to possession when they adopt western life styles abroad; yet, contemporarily, western spirits also highlight the heightened vulnerability to possession of those Ethiopians living at home who are fascinated with a modern, western elsewhere (cf. McIntosh 2004; Smith 2001). If the white man has become a demon, Ethiopians are increasingly becoming like whites.

However, in this demonic global topography, the exorcist presented Ethiopia as the last bastion of faith. Having seized the rest of the world, demons now march confidently towards the last obstacle to their victory. The resistance of the true faith, despite all odds, is the reason that “spirits are in havoc” in today’s Ethiopia. As spirits resentfully attested: “We returned to Ethiopia because here our job is not done yet;” “Now we are taking the youth and in one generation there will be no necklace with a cross (*metab*);” “Here lies the Ark [Ark of the Covenant] but we will take it through your betrayal.” The nexus between geo-historical and cosmological narratives was also articulated through more reassuring demonic statements: “Every time his [the host’s] feet touch Ethiopian soil we burn already” (hinting at the sacredness of Ethiopia); “Here we have been defeated, I want to go back to Germany;” “We hate Ethiopia, here there is holy water everywhere!” Furthermore, spirits galvanized national pride by speaking of Ethiopia’s divine election and deep faith despite pervasive poverty: “Here people are poor but God feeds them from above;” “Even if people don’t have money, God doesn’t let them down;” “What is the use of wealth if then you [white people] don’t have God and we can make you taste hell in this world?”

Suspended between the demonization of the other and self-critique, between the celebration of local forms of ritual power and the bitter reality of the Orthodoxy’s loss of followers and national appeal, the drama of exorcism is experienced, I suggest, as part of a spiritual war whose results are uncertain. To echo the opening statement of this chapter, “Ethiopia is at war”; and Mihimir Girma has exhorted all believers to take part and take sides in what he sees as the most decisive of all battles.

4. Conclusion: theatricality, history, alterity, and sameness

Reorienting the host to the orthos doxa

Once I asked a possessed woman where the voice telling her “I should kill myself” came from. The answer was, “From inside” (*ke wistu*). Here the “inside” is not the seat of a singular subjectivity, but a murky, uncharted territory where a cacophony of voices renders it impossible to discriminate between different intentionalities. Exorcism delimits and isolates demonic powers. It produces entities that can be publically engaged by others—entities that condense and crystallize multifarious feelings of oppression, estrangement, and collective uncertainty. At the onset of exorcism proper, Mihimir Girma calls demons by their name. In responding to this call with disorderly bodily reactions and obscene statements, the spirits publically acknowledge the authority of the exorcist and, by extension, that of the Orthodoxy he represents.

During sermons and interactions with demons, as the exorcist craftily spins the narrative threads of the entanglements between Ethiopia and foreign spirits, the characters of this story come to life, shouting for attention from the crowd and on the stage. This is a story that brings into being what it purports to represent. Spirits’ responsiveness is not dictated by active will, but by an irrepressible compulsion that signals their status as lower beings subjected to the power of the Orthodox hierarchy, despite their sinful and ephemeral aspirations to autonomy. Thus interpellated and coerced into visibility, demons become key in the (re)subjectification of an Orthodox person, firmly resituated in his or her religious community and tradition. To play with Orthodox spatial-bodily idiom: in attempting to separate deeply intertwined host and spirit, exorcism reorients the host by turning his or her face towards God and the sacred history of Ethiopia, while making him or her turn away from the demonic, leaving behind the modern perversions that spirits embody.

The notion that spirits resemble their hosts is not new to Ethiopian thought. In his seminal study of the *zar* cult, Michel Leiris (1988) reported sayings such as “like *zar* like horse [host],” or “the *zar* resembles its horse.” In the context of Istifanos, far from being icons of inversion, spirits often act as intensifications of their host’s negative moral traits. Spirits are “echoes of the subject” (Pandolfo 2005). New spirits echo their hosts by narrating their modern vicissitudes from an alien point of view, underscoring

the continuities between demonic and human characters. Yet, the host does not recognize these vindictive and capricious voices as his or her own, and won't recognize them as such even after the spirit's departure. Indeed, exorcism makes the host's past actions visible to him or her—as well as to others—as something other than the product of a discrete, impermeable, sinful human self (cf. Lambek 2003; 2010a; 2013). Crucially, the host is not—or not entirely—responsible for the pains and transgressions of possession; and it is not his or her agency that will determine the success of deliverance.

Indeed, in exorcism, the Orthodox subject is reconstituted through a coordinated ritual labour, carried out by various human others, which is informed by relational logics not dissimilar to those described in previous chapters. Possessed people are *acted upon* by the exorcist, his helpers, and the divine power instantiated in the holy water and the *mekutaria*. The bodies of possessed people are humbled, opened, and relinquished to the moulding of forces external to them (cf. Mittermeier 2012). In other words, being reoriented as an Orthodox person, freed from the depravity of the demonic, is less an issue of agency or individual self-making than a communal quest that needs to be shared through a multiplicity of actors. In its patency and malleability, the Orthodox subject is not reconstituted as a singularity in relation to God; rather, the subject can be brought back into relation to God because he or she is brought back into relation to the Orthodox community and a shared Orthodox history. The subject is first and foremost emplaced and replaced in a collective, regaining the right kind of past, again becoming a ring in a chain originating from Adam and reaching one of the dearest countries to God. Exorcism is a drama of reintegration and an act of return.

A lived theatre of society and spirits

The “*théâtre vécu*”⁵⁴ (lived theatre) of exorcism transects different registers: the cosmic, the national, and the intimate. My friend Adanu commented: “Mihimir Girma's exorcism is like *Sew le Sew* [“Man for Man”, a popular soap opera], but better and with spirits.” Part of the appeal of exorcism lies in its graphic capacity to tie abstract cosmology to the immanency of the problems of families, of youth, and of the

⁵⁴ In Leiris' formulation: “[A] type of theatre, which is maybe also for its part play-acted, but with a minimum amount of artifice and devoid of any intention to deceive the spectator” (Leiris cited in Benedicty-Kokken 2015:134).

social change in which everybody is enmeshed. Staging and dramatizing these issues through spirits' performances, exorcism casts them in a new, unconventional light.

Following Victor Turner, the performative genre of exorcism does not “merely ‘reflect’ or ‘express’” disorders inherent to “the social system or the cultural configuration”; but the relationship between performance and the social matrix of the everyday is “reciprocal and reflective,” in that “performance is often a critique, direct or veiled, of the social life it grows out of” (1987:22; cf. Boddy 1988). By commenting with eloquence on contemporary social problems, spirits inaugurate new trajectories of knowledge (Boddy 1989:303), prompting critical reflection and reassessment of people's encounters with various manifestations of “the modern” and “the foreign”. This process helps demarcate the boundaries between religious groups, as well as between domains of practice, materiality, and thought that can or cannot be incorporated in the fold of Orthodoxy. And, this assessment of the perils of modernity and cultural alterity is regularly linked—in a more or less explicit fashion—to conflict and friction affecting the sphere of kinship to which everybody can relate.

Exorcism is, then, an efficacious practice of ordering. The sheer violence and spectacular aggression enacted by demons, exorcist, and helpers is a crucial means of this ordering. Spirits, and the vicious modern tendencies they hypostasize, are abused and humiliated in a public spectacle that validates the efficacy and superiority of Orthodoxy—illustrating through the lyricism of demonic agony that there is no redemption, whether in this world or beyond, outside the EOC. In the context of Istifanos, as the new spirits typeset supra-individual forms of religiosity, tastes, and proclivities, their human vessels (see Benedicty-Kokken 2015:135) express less their singular individuality than they exemplify what might happen to people in their encounters with modernity and fraught historical forces. Thus, if the violence of exorcism might be said to have an individualizing effect in separating spirit and host, it could be equally said that what is publically chastised is not an individual spirit standing for a personal vice, but a demonic entity indexing vicious tendencies running through society at large (cf. Oosterbaan 2009:58). Exorcism is a re-constitution and re-orientation of the one as a synecdoche for the many (cf. Godelier 1996:52).

Members of the audience do not simply observe a life tragically similar to their own, nor do they simply learn stories that resonate uncannily with their experience. What

unfolds on the stage is not just a story one hears and sees, but a story one lives. Paraphrasing Nadia Seremetakis' (1991) argument on the inter-subjectivity of death in Greek lamentations, what takes place is not just a story about possession and the demonic, nor an evaluation of their perils and mechanics; it is a performance that allows the audience to live and experience the demonic in all its rawness, as well as the cathartic liberation from it. Indeed, many seemingly unimpassioned members of the audience fall into trance while witnessing exorcistic performances, and are called to undergo exorcism in turn—after all, many people go to Istifanos suspecting the presence of an alien entity hiding within them.

It is worth remarking that, like satire, exorcism can voice accusations and condemnations against other religious groups in a churchyard that cannot be voiced explicitly in other public forums. The licentious atmosphere of this circumscribed space is all the more salient under current political conditions, wherein religious equality is constitutionally protected, and such blatant claims against other religious groups would invite severe political consequences.

Histories of endurance and betrayal and the rerouting of modernity

Alessandra Benedicty-Kokken detects in Leiris' work a deep recognition of possession as "exemplary of practices that cultivate vulnerability as a state of being," putting "into play how a person may be rendered defenceless to material and spiritual forces" (2015:129). Mihimir Girma's exorcism creatively expands this commentary on vulnerability in its scope, so as to encompass broader histories and scales of confrontation between the self and the other. Studies of foreign spirits in Africa point at how the power of otherness can be ritually appropriated, tamed, and resisted through extreme forms of mimesis (such as ritual trance). Reflecting on the relationship between possession and art, Heike Beherend and Ute Luig interpret foreign spirits as "mimetic ethnographies making use of the Other to differentiate the self," reinforcing its boundaries and power (1999:xviii; see Kramer 1993; Stoller 1994). Paul Stoller notes that embodying the alterity of colonial others through spirits that mirror their cultural traits is a way of articulating a parody of foreign forces, and of controlling their potency through a ritual satire of the very symbols of domination (1989:249). The spirits have the semblance of the dominators but, by ridiculing them, possession articulates a corrosive critique that asserts the superiority of the self and the local (cf.

Beneduce 2002:101-116). In partial contrast with these views, I want to highlight a deep-seated tension inherent in the treatment of the historicity of self-other relationships in *Istifanos*: the drama of possession is forever suspended between pride and humiliation, victory and defeat, celebration of the self and unforgiving self-critique, the assertion of local identity and the fear of having already become the other.

Unlike adoricism, in exorcism spirits' otherness is embodied only temporarily and only in order to be excised. In the first two parts of this section, I traced an optimistic picture by describing exorcism as a demonstrative drama of victory. Nevertheless, as I suggested, exorcism compels the constant re-enactment of victory over the foreign and modern other because the ritual as a whole resounds with the echo of defeat. To an extent, the external forces in need of purging have already won—as attested by the insinuation of spirits into human genealogies, and the disquieting blending of human and non-human features in the Ethiopian population—Ethiopians look increasingly like the spirits that possess them. This assessment is not to belittle exorcisms' narrative of hope, but to stress that exorcism's many and contrasting messages are never univocal. The exorcist illustrates the superiority of Orthodoxy, but punctually displays a myriad of Orthodox bodies capitulating to alien forces on an unprecedented scale (cf. Olivier de Sardan 1993). The possessed people are simultaneously considered complicit in a crime of cultural betrayal, and excused as victims of the sins of those who preceded them. In exorcism, Ethiopia is glorified as the last bastion of true faith, and as an "island of Christianity", while being depicted as hosting a population of traitors to their sacred history (cf. Wendl 1999).

All the actors of possession speak of the collective moral failure of a society unable to reproduce local tradition (see Smith 2001). During sermons, the exorcist even historicizes generational failure, treachery, and their ensuing curses. Spirits possess their hosts, making them become like whites, modern, and Protestant—in and outside the time of trance—but only because hosts are already worryingly similar to the whites, live modern lives, and are attracted to Protestant styles of religiosity. Writing about masking practices among the Mapuche, Magnus Course notes that indigenous clowns embodying the traits of Chilean whites "represent the instantiation of a moment when it ceases to make sense to speak of relationships between [...] Self and Other, which instead become visible as converging points of a continuum of transformation" (2013:773). While in our context, maintaining a self-other distinction

might be appropriate—exorcism’s telos is, after all, one of differentiation—I wish to re-emphasize that new spirits are not merely instantiations of a culturally remote otherness, but of Ethiopians’ transformative capacity to become other, and to become modern (see Course 2013; cf. Krings 1999; McIntosh 2004).

Despite the fact that the modernity nestled in new types of Ethiopian lives, together with their spirit derivatives—or causatives, depending on how you look at it—is construed in inimical terms, it would be incorrect to read Mihimir Girma’s ritual performances as plainly anti-modern. Separated from their modern spirits, people continue to have modern lives in the midst of the fast developing capital, cultivating modern aspirations and desires as they remain entangled in a global flux of signs, commodities, and styles. The exorcist himself could not reach such large and varied audiences—the crowd in the church, the buyers of the VCDs, the YouTube followers—without a keen sympathy for modern technology. With reference to colonial and post-colonial Africa, Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff note that “new political cultures were born from countless couplings of the ‘local’ and ‘global’ world, from intersecting histories that refocused European values and intentions—thus rerouting [...] the march of modernity” (1993:xvi). This notion of rerouting aptly captures Mihimir Girma’s engagement with modern forces. Rather than the rejection of a monolithically conceived modernity, the exorcist enacts the ritual possibility—open to uncertainties and risks—of engaging with modernization in a relationship that is not one of enslavement to modern passions and the seduction of modern things. The modern and the foreign are not just vernacularized or vanquished, but rather subjected to a process of inspection and strategic selection, aimed at re-establishing control over the permeable frontiers of Orthodoxy. Such processes aim to discriminate between those aspects of modernity that can be accepted and others that cannot, while attempting to subordinate the conceptual and material stuff of modernity to Ethiopianess and its core charismatic centre, the EOC.

CONCLUSION

1. The relational ethics of Orthodoxy and the virtue of the Orthodox system

This thesis has traced the specific relational ethics that underpin religious life for Ethiopian Orthodox believers in Addis Ababa. I have tried to situate practices and ideologies of subject-formation within this ethical matrix, by drawing upon fine-grained ethnographic descriptions of a wide range of social interactions, religious exchanges and forms of devotion. Orthodox subjects and lives are made and remade within social collectives, which bind together humans, saints, angels, and demons under the aegis of God's overarching power. Within such religious assemblages, the material precariousness and spiritual endeavours of Orthodox believers are made sustainable by collaborative, other-oriented labour, performed by a plurality of religious actors—intimate social others who pray for you, share food and holy water with you, attend exorcisms and even host demons with you. I have argued that productive spiritual relationships between Orthodox believers are thickened, reproduced, and even brought into being through ethical practices that take the distinctive form of “doing-for”, “doing-with”, and “doing-on-behalf” of others. For most ordinary Orthodox Christians living in poor neighbourhoods in today's Addis Ababa, it is the networks within which these diverse but interdependent forms of relational “doing” unfold—rather than institutional rituals—that constitute the basis of urban religious experience and action.

As I have illustrated, everyday forms of spiritual labour are commonly oriented towards the sharing of blessing. Blessing is a manifestation of divine potency that takes on multiple forms. It is both a free, divine gift, and something that can be infinitely reproduced through intentional human action. Blessing is the partible and sharable stuff of relationship with the divine. By definition, blessing cannot be retained by a given individual, and Orthodox believers are enjoined to facilitate its social distribution and circulation. By enabling this endless circulability, the collective religious labour of ordinary believers contributes to the making and remaking of their social world, transforming it into an Orthodox one in which the chasm between perfect divinity and fallible, embodied humanity is reduced and bridged. The capacity of a

given believer to draw others into circles of blessing that s/he has managed to bring into being through individual acts of devotion constitutes a distinctive feature of religious action in the capital. The extensibility of blessing to close others marks the Orthodox system as one produced and sustained by intricate, intertwined chains of intercession.

Previous studies of Ethiopian Orthodoxy have placed particular emphasis on the intercessory role of saints and the clergy (Boylston 2012, 2013). In this thesis, I have argued that any account of intercession and the social trajectories of blessing is necessarily incomplete if it does not consider the ways in which lay religious actors become intercessors of blessing in their own right—by, for instance, giving alms in the name of a saint for a sister living abroad, or undertaking excruciating fasts for the sake of a troubled child. By examining the paramount labour of eliciting blessing for other members of the household—a task performed mostly by women—my dissertation has revealed that kinship is vital to the production of blessed Orthodox lives and subjects. This labour of intercession is an understated and often invisible undertaking, continuous with women's most prosaic acts of care and provision. From this perspective, the household emerges as a main site generation and reproduction of Orthodoxy at large. I have emphasised how the reach of lay forms of intercession draws in the household's surroundings, tying together neighbours, kin and saints in various devotional networks that are essential to daily religiosity and survival.

By foregrounding mundane networks, I do not intend to diminish the importance of the EOC rituals performed by ordained clergy. Clerical rituals and figures do not stand in contrast to kinship-based, lay forms of religious labour, but rather exist in a relationship of symbiotic complementarity with them. Churchly rituals foreground the vertical dimension of male clerical authority, which regulates access to sacred institutional spaces through a hierarchy of states of purity—effectively excluding many believers at specific times in their lives. By contrast, the circulation of blessing enabled by horizontal relationships of kinship and neighbourliness is subjected to much less stringent ritual restrictions; it opens avenues through which divine salvific potency is made more easily accessible in mundane spaces, outside churches. This more democratic sociality of blessing emphasises the feminine, domestic, and nurturing aspects of the ways in which people can build mediated relations with God. I have termed this intertwined configuration of vertical and horizontal religious

engagement a geometry of blessing. Crucially, the greater flexibility and leniency afforded by the horizontal axis of this configuration allows Orthodox subjects who consider themselves too impure to partake in many churchly rituals, or to approach specific sacred substance (e.g. the Eucharist), to connect with God through relational circuits of shared blessing—and in fact to forge their own religious spheres of agency.

In their attempts to craft spiritually productive lives, the vast majority of my informants did not seek the eradication or definitive resolution of the moral ambiguities inhering in their quotidian urban existence. Nor were many of my informants preoccupied with projects of self-fashioning oriented towards the achievement of the most valued forms of individual piousness or moral perfection. Rather, their ethical concerns lay squarely with relational forms of religious action, and the salience of that labour to their lives and the lives of others. The religious work of “doing-for”, “doing-with”, and “doing-on-behalf” of others balanced out moral inadequacies, and made ethically ambivalent Orthodox lives endurable and meaningful. The religious networks that were so crucial to my informants push the discussion of subject-formation and Christian piety beyond recent debates of personhood and moral subjectivity (e.g. Daswani 2011; Mahmood 2005; Meyer 1999; Mosko 2010). These debates have been highly productive, but leave the significance of religious collectives somewhat unexplored. My dissertation has suggested that for many urban Orthodox believers, what is key to the making of spiritual lives is less a systematic quest for religious virtuosity, than a practice of keeping avenues of access to the divine open (Bandak & Boylston 2014)—through relationships with a plurality of intimate others and a wider religious community. I have attempted to demonstrate how living a productive Orthodox life is a process of striving to align with, retain connection to, and become an active part of the living Orthodox tradition, *together* with others.

This orientation reveals something fundamental about Ethiopian Orthodoxy. In the Orthodox framework, the source of perfection is not to be found in the pious individual and his or her religious endeavours, but in the religious system itself (see Bandak & Boylston 2014). This system ties together the laity, the ordained clergy, the divine, and a plethora of saintly beings into a “corporate body”—a church in the Durkheimian sense. The efficacy of such a system or church does not obtain from the moral qualities of its discrete human components, but from the inscrutable, divine agency that

operates through its institutions and collectives in such a way as to encompass, absorb and transcend post-lapsarian individual imperfection. Simply put, the ultimate good in the Orthodox tradition is its systemic actualization. But, as I hope to have illustrated, in contemporary Ethiopian society, this systemic view of the good also requires intense work to be sustained and realized in everyday relationships where mistrust, jealousy, deception, and domination are widespread.

2. Religious bodies and the flesh of Orthodoxy

The operative ground of the religious labour described in this dissertation is the body, and more specifically the flesh. This focus is partly a result of the distinctly Ethiopian Orthodox emphasis on the fasting, combined with a generalized sense of the embodied fallenness of humankind. Living conditions in Addis Ababa—which are characterized by poverty and intense desires of consumption, steep inequalities and critical dependencies, pervading stress about provision and the pressures of social obligations towards others—only emphasise this sense of fallenness for Orthodox inhabitants.

In everyday Orthodox experience, bodily practices—from drinking holy water, to fasting and exorcism—are pivotal. This dissertation has emphasised the communal nature of these practices and phenomena: people fast together, fetch and carry holy water for one another, and even their vulnerability to demons often turns out to be a familial, shared affliction whose cure—through exorcism and more holy water—is similarly communal. The collective nature of fallenness, sin, and possession, as well as of their attendant religious remedies, reveal that the embodied basis of Orthodox practice is also the basis by which religious work is shared and shareable. That is, it is through bodily work, through the real, material interconnection of bodies, that redemption becomes a collective enterprise.

Far from upholding a mere devaluation of bodiliness, or a neatly dualistic view of flesh and soul, Orthodox rituals and disciplines act on the flesh of interconnected individuals to reorient their needs, desires, and inclinations in spiritually productive directions. The flesh is “converted” from the site of sinfulness and excessive desire, inflated by the urban condition, into the material foundation of ethical action. Indeed, intersubjective and other-oriented dispositions of charity and forgiveness originate not in disembodied realizations, but in carnal affect and reflexes of sympathy proper to flesh that has been disciplined by fasting, attuned to Orthodox aims by holy water, and

freed from vexing demonic influences by exorcism. Thus, many of the religious relations I described are not simply relations *between* bodies, but are lived out *within* them (see Boddy 1993; Lambek 1992). It is through ascetic religious work on the flesh that the power of Orthodoxy is inscribed in the corporality of believers; and the collective character of embodied religious action, in turn, installs individuals in an Orthodox community of bodies, whose shared sensibilities and affects are moulded by similar—often synchronised—bodily practices (see Hirschkind 2001). Orthodox religion, in other words, operates on, and produces the flesh of the community.

3. Unstable frontiers of tradition and change

I contextualised my ethnographic analysis in the religiously pluralist setting of post-1995 Ethiopia, and I discussed the ramifications of this new situation in relation to the challenges posed by secularism, post-Derg trauma, and the resurgence of public religion—in spite of increasing monitoring by the state. Negotiations between public religion and state power have a long history in Ethiopia, the dynamics of which have been described in detail in a number of works (e.g. Bonacci 2000; Clapham 1988; Crummey 1972; Haustein & Ostebo 2011). This dissertation sought to illustrate the importance of these dynamics in the contemporary context of Addis Ababa, by paying particular attention to their effects in the mundane spaces where everyday life unfolds. Rather than focusing on the macro arenas of religious politics and the public sphere, I have shown how tensions between church and state critically affect social practices of kinship and neighbourliness, as well as relations of intimacy and care more broadly.

It has often been noted that Orthodox believers sought in their faith a source of security and stability during the political, economic, and social hardship of the Derg rule and its aftermath (Ancel & Ficquet 2015; Boylston 2012; Haustein & Ostebo 2011). With the current government's rise to power, the constitutional recognition of all faiths under state law, and the emergence of new material uncertainties, concerns have grown around the unprecedented scale of conversion to Protestantism. Orthodox believers appear increasingly preoccupied with Protestantism's increasing influence in local politics and non-governmental sectors, as well as with the economic power that Protestants draw from their transnational connections. These social anxieties notwithstanding, the fact remains that, for Orthodox believers their faith continues to be the root of all relationship-making, and hence the most obvious protection against

the various vulnerabilities of everyday life. It is in this sense that Orthodox relatedness remains crucial to the ongoing processes of adapting, resisting and creatively responding to the puzzling effects of new secular policies, as well as to the intensification and quickening of Ethiopia's inclusion in the mechanics of global modernity.

In recent years, feelings of collective estrangement and instability translated into a pervasive sense of spiritual threat among Orthodox Christians. The scenes of Mihimir Girma's exorcism graphically reveal and vividly magnify the intensity of anxieties surrounding modernization, consumption, and religious pluralism. The violent aesthetics of these ritual performances also underscore, and cast new light upon the uncertainties inherent to secular education and the ambitions of "modernized" youth. Furthermore, the emergence of a panoply of modern spirits endowed with peculiarly western and modern cultural traits expresses concerns surrounding Ethiopia's relationship to the foreign world. Such acute preoccupations sustain a ritual narrative that depicts Ethiopia as the last bastion of pure Christian faith, assailed from every corner by external forces that are essentially demonic. The excision of "modern-foreign" spirits from Orthodox hosts susceptible to the lures of western modernity is implicated in tactics of boundary-policing that operate on different scales. I have argued that in re-establishing the relative closure of Orthodox bodies to undesirable, unorthodox influences—indexed by spirits—exorcism polices the unstable margins of Orthodoxy and its changing community. Specifically, exorcism constitutes an ongoing exercise in establishing which aspects of modernity and foreignness can be selectively re-inserted into Orthodoxy, and which are to be rejected altogether. Modernity's unruly force, with the spirits and confusion it begets, is thus tamed and rerouted to Orthodox ends in a loud celebration of the power of local tradition; but it is also—contradictorily—leveraged in vocal condemnation of the progressive erosion of the same tradition, in which contemporary Ethiopians are considered accomplices.

The inescapable ambiguities surrounding modernity and tradition are not confined to the sphere of exorcism, but constitute key aspects of Orthodox debates on contemporary Ethiopia. A persistent tension between the desire to live modern lives, but also to remain firmly anchored to a deep and glorious local history, still informs disparate aspects of social life in the midst of the hasty development of the Ethiopian capital. This tension animates the very endeavour of re-defining one's identity as an

Orthodox believer in the face of social change, by balancing and reassessing ideologies and aspirations of progress vis-à-vis the need to preserve threatened indigenous values and forms of knowledge. This dissertation has not sought to explain away the multifaceted frictions between social change and conservatism, foreignness and locality, tradition and modernity (however defined). Rather, I have tried to illuminate aspects of these tensions and their irresolvable complexity, by grounding their existential and pragmatic dilemmas in the lives of real individuals, real groups, and their daily religious practices. The ever-evolving process of defining what an Ethiopian Orthodox modernity could and should look like, as well as the re-signification of the Orthodox past and its retrospective realignments with a problematic present, are currently undergoing a spiralling intensification that constitutes an urgent focus for further research.

Mihimir Girma's charismatic exorcisms also display a worrisome ambiguity in the formal similarity they bear with the practices of Protestants—who are widely conceived to be hypermodern enemies of the ancient Orthodox tradition. For many informants, this ambiguity and similarity are focal concerns on a broader level. The EOC's deployment of modern media, technologies, and styles—considered foreign imports, like those that underpin the seductiveness of Protestantism—is deeply implicated in the fraught processes of renegotiating Orthodoxy's position in contemporary Ethiopian society. While these recent innovations enhance Orthodoxy's appeal to young people, and its capacity to speak to the “new Ethiopian”, members of the EOC are simultaneously concerned about being swallowed up by the alterity of un-Ethiopian and un-Orthodox religious aesthetics, values and tactics of evangelization. To paraphrase a priest, new religious forms might risk emptying Orthodoxy of its defining, essential content. This dissertation demonstrates that for Orthodox believers, despite the uncertainties inherent in any negotiations with religious others and changing socio-political conditions, some things remain unnegotiable. Most noticeably, the protective roles of the saints, angels and Mary are categorically excluded from any type of compromise. Through multifarious strategies, Orthodox believers continuously reassert the potency and necessity of these figures in the most passionate manner. I have argued that this uncompromising attitude is significant because saintly protectors and intercessors are central to the work of relationality around which Orthodox Christians build their religious and social lives.

Saints, angels, and the Virgin Mary are the lynchpins around which everything else makes sense in the Orthodox universe. Interactions with these non-human figures provide *models of* and *models for* quotidian sociality, itself characterized by the prominence of mediated relationships with powerful and proximate others, and predicated upon the necessity of various this-worldly human intercessors.

Recent research identifies upsurges in neo-traditionalist Orthodox reformist movements (Ancel & Ficquet 2015; Meron 2015). Such movements are largely composed by educated Orthodox Christians, who seek to reclaim public space and to counter the influence of other denominations in the liberalized religious market. But this dissertation has described people whose religious work around modernity and daily uncertainty is quite different. I have not focused on the committed activist and the zealous reformist, but on ordinary believers who constitute the vast majority of the Orthodox population. As I hope to have shown, ordinary believers' daily religious labour turns out to be extremely important in the process of reproducing Orthodoxy—even if these are not people who take to the street or adopt a reflexive theological stance towards their faith. For poor people in precarious circumstances, the telos of their spiritual effort is not explicitly linked to influencing the deliberations of the EOC or the state, nor to the reform of Orthodox theology. In addressing urgent questions of religious and social change, we should not forget that for the majority of Orthodox Christians, what matters most is cultivating a spiritual life that makes their shared existence both worthwhile and survivable.

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Following established conventions, Ethiopian authors are listed by their first name, followed by their second and third name.

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Appendix: Photographs



Figure 1: Child running in Piassa



Figure 2: Children in Piassa (Serategna Sefer)



Figure 3: The street close to Taytu hotel



Figure 4: The street close to Taytu hotel

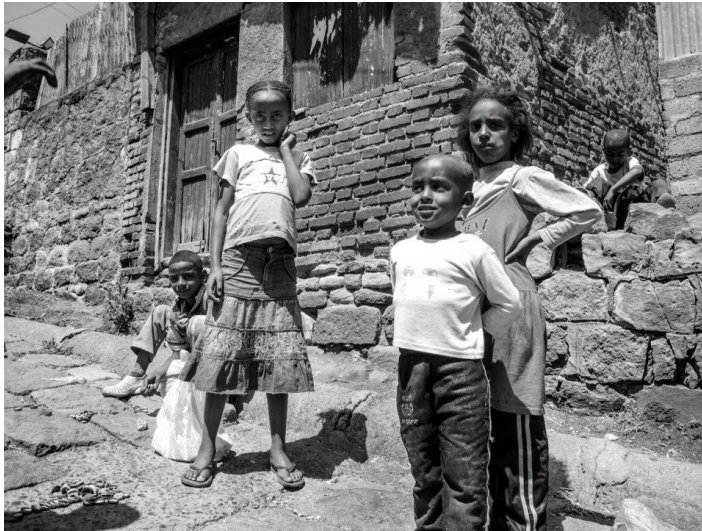


Figure 5: Children in Piassa (Serategna Sefer)



Figure 6: One of the commercial streets of Piassa



Figure 7: Priest carrying the *tabot* wrapped into cloth on his head



Figure 8: Orthodox believers praying on the threshold of St. George church (Piassa)



Figure 9: Young priest



Figure 10: Piassa in the early morning (Serategna Sefer)



Figure 11: Meal time at a priest's house



Figure 12: Women selling vegetables in Piassa



Figure 13: Children in Piassa (Serategna Sefer)



Figure 14: Rural priest



Figure 15: Exorcism in Istifanos church, Mihimir Girma sprays one possessed person with holy water



Figure 16: Exorcism in Istifanos church, Mihimir Girma sprays the crowd with holy water



Figure 17: Possessed woman in Istifanos church



Figure 18: Possessed people on the stage in Istifanos church



Figure 19: Possessed woman collapsing in Istifanos church



Figure 20: Mihimir Girma spraying a young possessed man with holy water



Figure 21: Mihimir Girma applying a cross to the forehead of a possessed person